

NASHRAMH: The Red Thread

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by

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To the memory of Sarah of Vienna
and all of those in long exile
who listen for the soundings of the Shofar.

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LISA JEAN BOTHELL is a native of Seattle, Washington and was born in that city during the summer of 1965. At the time of writing, she was attending the University of Washington and majoring in history. This volume is her first attempt at serious writing and is based on legends related to her by her father.

FOREWORD

My name is Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor, the primary archivist for our Nashramh Sisterhood, and herein I offer you a glimpse of our ancient order through these historic tales about our final coming of age after half a million tumultuous years of unsteady growth.

My earlier tales told of our spreading naval presence on the far-flung primitive rim-worlds of the sixth and seventh spiral arms of our beautiful Starset Galaxy. I spoke of our perplexing mistakes as well as our crowning victories, for none of us can grow without error, or without critical analysis of our ways. We call ourselves the 'Nashramh' which in our secret language, means 'Women of Compassionate Justice'. This title is both a mission and a goal which we've been chosen to pursue by ancient forces, from the first empyraeum, that occupy our Sacred Stones. As you will learn, many of us forgot our sense of fairness and compassion in the course of extreme events only to be brought back to the path after much terrible soul-searching and self-criticism. We have experienced many things since our early rise to power, and have much more to learn before we've truly come of age . . . but, herein we make the transition with the destruction of Samael-Borgdragon Estate.

We are not gods, as many primitive peoples mistakenly choose to believe, but mortals who wear our humanity in many ways. We are not the first to travel between the stars, but are one of the oldest continuous organizations of human souls known to do so. Thus, our tales reflect many races, human and others, who seek to defend our Starset Galaxy from invaders whose hidden origins are far out beyond the outer rim. These conquering intruders are known to us as the Legions of Adam Belial and the Sons of Samael. They are the lords of Samael-Borgdragon Estate wherein this tale begins.

I must direct your attention to a primary focal point of all our tales, and that is 'regeneration-cycles' of human souls into new bodies which we take for granted. That is, 'reincarnation' of human personalities isn't dealt with in mystical terms, but as an established and natural fact. Thus Miriam, Helene, Vargo and others, appear again and again throughout the course of our history. Hopefully, you, my dear guest and reader will find the concept both thought-provoking and interesting.

The Red Thread is the story of Miriam, the elf-child who acts as a special courier for our Nashramh Sisterhood and is elevated to our highest order, the Sister-Magum. This is the first of five post-Borgdragon era books, each a continuation from the former. Each book was published in the following order:

- 1) NASHRAMH: The Red Thread
- 2) NASHRAMH: The Blue Thread
- 3) NASHRAMH: The Gold Threads
- 4) NASHRAMH: The White Threads

This third edition of The Red Thread differs from the first two volumes in two important respects. First, it has a new format with improved typesetting. Second, the overall text has been tightened up and the first four chapters revised to add a wider view of events occurring before the destruction of Samael-Borgdragon. The writing style is designed to keep a certain innocence and freshness, while dealing with weighty matters. Thus, the use of archaic terms and odd word and sentence constructions is not accidental. You, the reader, will find this to be an unforgettable adventure and a story you will not only think about, but will reread many times.



Rinim

PRELUDE

The voice within the voice spoke in a whisper that permeated the swirling gases of newly formed galactic matter with scintillating chords of cosmic harmony. The galaxy, now only a billion years in the making, vibrated with the soft music of the Eternal's voice and the flowing vapors of glowing energy were imbued with the spirit of conscious life, bringing forth the light of primordial awareness into its now living substance.

The whispering music of the Eternal's voice continued with its coalescing harmony throughout the eons of temporal causation softly instructing the newborn cosmic intellect in the course of its very being, saying:

"Know you this, child of my spirit that I am without beginning or end, for I am both infinite and eternal. Know also you this - there is a division in my nature that bodes the testing of experiences renewed through which your primitive innocence shall be transformed into the matrix wherein the values of causative reality shall be shaped. For, it is through your living experience alone, that I will consider a new creation as yet only contemplated."

From within the swirling clouds of newborn life, the voice of the galactic intellect cried out in fear and trepidation: "Pray, oh, my Eternal Light, do not cast me alone into exile, for I fear the loneliness of existence without your presence."

Softly the whispering voice of the Eternal replied. "Fear you not that I shall leave you, for it is I alone who permeates your very being with my living light. I shall only remain hidden from your view so that you may experience the riddle of my causative reality free from both my protection and control; therein will you choose the enduring values of your emerging destiny."

"Know you this also, my beautiful creation whom I dub 'Starset', that as I now speak you will begin the process of your

long journey into temporal reality, and through its dimensions of time and space, until your testing has been thrice renewed, and again you reunite. For you shall now be rendered from a singular intellect into a countless multitude of living sparks which shall, in turn, be divided into opposite forms of intellectual light; the blue to be male and the red to be female. And, by this division shall the blue be dominated by a restlessness of unbridled passions for conquest and domination; while the red shall be driven by the need to control her destiny, for she shall bear the archives of life incarnate. Without the one, the other is incomplete. Thus, they shall never be satisfied nor contented with one and the other of their parts until their differences are reconciled and they again become as one."

The Eternal Intellect continued softly whispering to its cosmic child thus born into time without end. "Your reason for being is to experience and learn the lessons of causative reality and its hidden riddles, for you cannot truly know the light of my eternity without experiencing the darkness of my infinity - the abyss. Once you have begun your journey you shall never again be the same, for the experience of my causative reality will test your senses and shape your values. It will be from the bitter experience of continuous attack from both within and without that your choices shall be made. You must choose between the subjectively balanced wisdom of my compassionate justice and that of the controlled and sterile conformity of a purely objective justice. The first is predicated upon the values of mutual love and respect combined with freedom of movement and creative thought. The second is predicated upon the dictum of complete surrender of the self to total subjugation to a singular authority. The substance of your being, my Starset Galaxy, and all of your parts shall be a field of battle betwixt and between my diverse natures, the outcome of which I commend to your choice and experience - for you and your parts alone are my proxy upon whom I place my trust.

"Remember you this, in all of your multitudes of living sparks, each of whom will face corporeal death, and the terror that accompanies it, many times over: that I am the Eternal your Creator, and that you and all of my creation are one in myself and that you are not the property of any of my diverse parts or natures. For the soul of your very being is in Me alone!"

Slowly the Starset Galaxy swirled and moved through the void, its parts coalescing into ethereal components consisting of spirit,

mind and soul molded together as one and thence as temporal components divided into individual male and female personalities that permeated the very substance of its reality - physical matter. Each personality traveled alone through time and space, temporarily occupying each and every form of living matter from the simplest to the most complex. At first, each was only partially immersed in the temporal universe. Then, as greater experience had been gained in the myriads of living physical forms, each became more individualized in his or her separate being and finally entered the nearly total exile of corporeal existence as a human being. Evolving into this state of near exile from the security of their common ethereal origins they began their long process of discovering the riddle of their causative universe and the conflicting values from which they must determine the path of their corporate destiny.

Chapter 1

Borgdragon

Samael-Borgdragon Estate's children's' playground was a beautifully landscaped park with trees, bushes, and secluded meadows where Colmer children could frolic and hunt for small game. Yes, the hunt had its character-building function along with its assortment of natural pleasures and plentiful game. Then, there was the day when one of the Colmer children's valuable trophies disappeared and couldn't be found. This was the beginning of the end of Borgdragon Estate.

19:00-22 SHABIN 6610-6N5

ZZZZZZZOP!

Howling in terror, the creature pitched forward into a hollow crater. Its breathing rasped unevenly as it lay gasping for breath on the dusty ground. Around and above, explosive bursts of blinding raw energy surged and flashed across rough terrain. Each zzzzzop evoked shrill cries and moans from unknown quarters, cries which were sometimes abruptly cut off, but more often became gurgling moans of pain and slow death.

Silence - vast engulfing silence. It could hear only its own painfully labored breathing. Its injured mind spun in dull confusion, knowing only throbbing red pain and unfocused light seen, and felt, through a single watery eye.

ZZZZZZZOP!

A frantic thrashing and a terrified pain-filled scream filled the air. Then a whimpering moan of something unknown. Instinctively, the body lurched away from the horrible cries. Some overwhelming instinct guided and kept it low to the ground. Crawling, rolling,

and slithering its way through unyielding objects in a rush of blind flight, the creature fled for its life.

ZZZZZZZOP!

In utter panic, gasping for breath, it lurched away from the terrible sound, somehow keeping its unreasoned direction. Without warning, before dull reflexes could react, it plummeted down.

WHHHOPPP!

The creature crashed heedlessly into a thorny bush, which clung to a large boulder 500 meters below the edge of a cliff. Held fast by gnarled branches, it lay still, floating between unconsciousness and death.

Slowly, the creature stirred its eye opening and rotating painfully. It could see waves of a dark, foreboding ocean pounding against the cliff far below.

Gripped by panic, the creature clung to the thick twisted branches with tiny, scaly, claw-like hands. Then it calmed gradually, its mind still in dull shock. As its raspy breathing evened out, it cautiously turned its head to see more. High above, it could barely see the dry, rocky cliff and the huge billowing clouds swimming overhead. Its vision began to clear, and the creature also heard, with unusual clarity, the muffled crashes of waves so far below, the dull roar of wind buffeting the cliff, and occasional, far-off *zzzzzzzops*.

An unexplainable urge caused the eye to search the cliff. A narrow ridge, parallel to the upper edge of the cliff, blended almost invisibly with the dark surface in both directions as far as the eye could see.

An odd compulsion caused the creature to cautiously disengage itself from the coarse, clinging branches and thorns that tore at it. Clinging to the sharp edge of the narrow ridge with small spidery feet, it crept to the right. Step after hesitant step brought dull agony to the unthinking creature as it grasped both sharp protrusions and shallow hollows with aching hands and stumbled on rough edges with aching, torn feet, following . . . it knew not what.

A long-dead bush blocked the creature's passage with gnarled, tough branches. Stopping to catch its breath, the little creature grasped a thick limb. A ragged hole in the thickly tangled limbs revealed the entrance to a dark cave.

Impulsively, it climbed up, under the dried, prickly branches, onto a ledge in front of the cave. A distant sound of a sizzling *zzzzzzzop* startled it, and lurching forward, it crawled quickly inside. The body collapsed onto the stone floor of the cool cave that was almost a meter high and just high enough to stand up.

The creature lay unmoving, more unconscious than asleep, its body utterly exhausted. Delirious dreams filled its uneasy slumber: fragments of images and sounds, a sudden pain, face and shoulders striking pavement, voices, lights, then nothing . . . a light, movements, softness, noise, panic, pain, then nothing. And so it dreamed and twitched as the dark red sun set over the edge of the listless, dark ocean. Darkness came and went, and a new burnished light softly illuminated the cave. A new day had begun.

The creature awoke slowly. It lay suspended in a soothing nothingness and silence, which abruptly ended with its first conscious movement. Suddenly an explosive pain shot through its wasted limbs, and sharp daggers of white pain stabbed through an already dull, throbbing head, still filled with thick clouds of nothingness.

It awakened more fully, its breathing labored and rasping with each gasp of the cool, damp air gently wafting through the cave's mouth. Slowly, on the edge of collapse, it crawled to the opening, each movement becoming increasingly painful.

Morning dew had formed a shallow pool at the cave's mouth. Slowly, the creature thrust its hard, parched tongue through swollen, cracked lips and into the cool water.

A surge of pain shot through its cracked tongue and the creature recoiled with a start, but insistent thirst overrode all sense of pain, and it tried again. The pain grew less severe, and as the creature slowly lapped at the cool, refreshing water, its tongue softened and the pain receded. Soon nothing remained of the pool, and the head instinctively pulled back into the relative security of the cave. The weary body slumbered again, motionless for a long time in a state of soothing nothingness.

The long day wore on, and in the late afternoon, bright rays of the blood-red sun pierced through thick billowing clouds and into the cave, startling the creature awake. It lay still awhile longer, its head and eye turned away from the bright light. The body's aches were still insistent but dulled by a more prominent gnawing, dull ache which filled its bloated stomach and chest.

The creature stared around the shallow cave, discovering two bulky objects deeper inside. Impulsively, it looked more closely, moving toward them with an unfamiliar sense of wonder. Its hand probed, and touched the soft, fine texture of a strange cloth, which shimmered and blended with its own grey skin and the dark stone floor. The creature tugged at the cloth to look at it in the light nearer the cave's opening, then paused. A strange, yellowed skeleton lay curled up beneath the garment. Shreds of material lay in dusty tatters and long matted strands of fine yellow hair encircled the dry skull.

Oddly curious, the creature began probing the strange remains with hesitant pokes and jabs. Discovering a gold chain which held a small, metallic object around the skeletal neck, the gray hands pulled it away, scattering odd shaped bones as the chain passed through them. It lifted the chain and gingerly placed it over its own head, dimly realizing through thick clouds of nothingness that it had a neck of its own.

Probing further, the creature found three hand-sized black metallic objects, each connected to a long strap of some odd material. The straps were in turn connected together and strung through three metal loops on a wide belt. Two of them passed through the loops and connected with two large, bulky things covering the skeleton's feet. There were no other objects.

The creature stared at the strange objects for awhile. Then, urged by an unreasoned compulsion, it began to remove them from the skeleton. After close examination, it pulled one of the bulky things over its own foot. The boot was soft, reaching just above the creature's spindly knee, and after a short pause, it pulled the second boot over its other foot. Next, the creature pulled the wide, too-long belt around its tiny waist, experimentally winding it twice. Then, with suddenly flexible and knowing fingers, it fastened the still gleaming gold buckle.

The eye studied the other three straps, discovering they were adjustable and secured with removable metal fasteners. Then the creature experimented again, tightening the straps to hold the boots on comfortably. It slowly stood up, partly crouched, and haltingly shuffled around the cave. The three metallic objects dragged behind, but the oversized boots were comfortable.

The creature noticed the strange cloth again and hunkered down to examine it. It shimmered and blended with the

surrounding stone, fascinating the creature, which began probing the soft material. Discovering a gold chain connecting two parts of the odd cloth, it decisively pulled the material over its head so the chain held fast around its scrawny neck. The cloth covered the creature from the neck down. Finally, it slung the three straps with the metallic objects over its bony shoulder and around its neck to keep from tripping on them.

Driven on by an urgent and overpowering compulsion, the reluctant creature crawled out of its secure cave and onto the ledge. Wincing at the prickly bush, it carefully lowered itself onto the ridge on which it had originally traveled. The creature could hear its own grunts and wheezes of effort, as it clung to the dead bush.

Moving sluggishly to the right again, it felt agonizing pain as it urged its wounded and stiff body on. By sliding the booted feet along the rough ridge and grasping every handhold that the eye could see, the creature made slow progress.

After only a short distance, the creature swayed in sudden pain as tired muscles cramped. Without warning, an unseen force tugged one of the three metallic objects slung around the creature's neck. In an instant, it made contact with a blank area on the cliff's face. Loosing its footing, the startled creature hung about a meter below the solidly attached device. After dangling for short moments in dim astonishment, the driving compulsion forced it to grasp the strap attaching the device to the belt, and to pull itself weakly up to the ridge.

Once back on the ridge, the creature tried to remove the device which was held fast by some unseen attraction between the metal and the cliff wall. Studying it, the eye saw a small amber light shining on the device. The hand gingerly touched the light, and the device fell away. On impulse, the creature put the mechanism back on the same spot, and it again stuck securely to the cliff. The creature experimented with a second identical device, which fastened itself onto a sheer area about a meter to the right.

Pressing the amber light on the first device, the creature disengaged it. It moved easily with a second mechanism with the support of the attached strap. Then the creature groped for another spot with the first device, finding it about a meter to the right.

Over and over the nearly exhausted creature repeated the new sequence mechanically, making better progress than before because of the supporting anchors.

Suddenly, the creature lost its footing. The ridge had completely disappeared, leaving it dangling from one anchor. Swinging automatically to the right, it attached the second anchor, finding itself suspended by the two devices securely strapped through the belt and boots. The creature now had to swing itself to the right to compensate for its less than a meter arm span. It quickly grew accustomed to the smoothly functional design despite its lingering shock and pain.

On and on the small creature went, its weak muscles aching and wrenching with the effort. It needed water, but moved along steadily, completely obscured from view by the billowing cape, which blended with the rocky cliff. Overhead, the giant blood-red sun moved slowly across the cloudy sky.

It reached an abrupt turn in the cliff, and hung motionless for a few moments. It felt compelled to cautiously reach around the sharp edge, and after blind probing, felt the anchoring device pull and make contact with the cliff's surface on the other side. Then disconnecting the left-hand anchor and mechanically swinging around the outcrop, it kept moving in the now conditioned process. The eye had glimpsed what lay ahead, but it took several moments for the mind to register the scene.

The cliff went on for quite a distance, but its great height and length was dwarfed by a mammoth black wall. The wall rose high up above the cliff's rim as far as the eye could see, and stretched out of sight along the raging sea. It was beautiful in its perfection, but hideous in its ominous ness, and the light of the blood-red sun was not reflected by it, but instead was swallowed by the blackness as though it had never shone. Black and looming, the wall dominated everything.

Feral Han studied the special detainee list one of his operators from the Central Reception Section's Interrogation Block had sent to him. As he carefully matched each name with its corresponding description of the Enemy Operative Profile Digest Listing, he mused that only six of the 200 new arrivals showed any promise for potential informational use. This was normal, but he looked forward to the day when he would meet an above average detainee from whom he could extract something of value for his superiors.

As chief warder for Samael-Borgdragon Estate, Feral Han was responsible for the proper disposition, routing, interrogation, lodging, and disposal of all incoming and resident detainees. His major responsibility, however, was to account for and record all of these dispositions, and he took special care that nothing was left to chance with respect to his performance. During the entire history of his administration, not one error had ever been committed. Perfection was expected.

As chief warder, Feral enjoyed the many privileges of his rank, such as his spacious office suite, his most efficient and beautiful secretary, and control over a personal administrative staff of 33 aud-specialists. He had, because of his intense faith, demonstrated abilities and efficiency, risen far up the administrative ladder for a man who was now only 190 years old. He enjoyed his work, and with his soft manners and lack of personal stress, along with his rapid rise to power, had taken real pride in himself and his tall, muscular frame. His fair-haired and blue-eyed appearance attracted attention wherever he went.

Feral reclined comfortably in his high-backed leather chair and pressed a button to contact his secretary. The light on Feral's comm-unit blinked, and he pressed the reception bar with tapered, exquisitely manicured fingers. The image of Nels Senor, the keeper of the children's playground, flashed on the screen before him. Nels was also tall, blond and blue-eyed, the image of all of the Lord-on-High's officers.

"Yes, Nels, what may I do for you?" Feral asked softly, smiling benignly in the manner of his genteel masters.

Nels hesitated, gently cleared his throat, and answered, "Good evening, my lord. May I have a private meeting with you so we may discuss certain trophy information?"

Feral studied the gamekeeper, noting his nervousness and that his voice lacked its normal authoritative, though gentle, force. He would have to correct his subordinate's inability to mask his feelings.

"Why yes, Nels. When would you like to meet with me?"

"First thing in the morning, my Lord," Nels replied crisply. "But first, I would appreciate it if someone on your staff would check out the ID profile on one of our trophies. The tracking number is 901668-MB-40061."

Feral's eyes narrowed ever so slightly; he knew something must have gone amiss, or Nels wouldn't have inquired after a detainee's ID profile. Could it be that he had misplaced one of his charges? If he had, Feral was privately relieved that the gamekeeper was not under his direct supervision. He paused for a moment, again studying the man, then, responded even more softly than usual, "Why certainly Nels. When would you like to have it?"

The answer was nearly a stammer, "As soon as possible if you will my lord."

"So be it," Feral agreed. "I'll have a courier hand carry a facsimile of the file to you immediately. Will that be all, Nels?"

"Yes, my lord. Thank you most kindly." Nels performed a half-bow in the comm-unit screen, a little rigidly, as Feral depressed the disconnect bar.

Feral summoned his secretary and instructed her to send a special ML-4 warder from intelligence to relay the detainee's file to the gamekeeper. Before she left, he requested, "Please ask the warder to inquire, most discreetly, as to the exact nature of the problem, and to report to me immediately upon his return."

"Yes, my lord," she replied in a quiet voice, and returned to her desk in the adjoining room.

Through its weariness, pain, and gnawing hunger, the creature experienced a new sensation - stark, paralyzing terror! There was an incredible wrongness in the monstrous sight looming before it, and the frightened creature wanted desperately to retreat, to hide, even to fall to its death, so great was its fear and intrinsic loathing of the immense wall. The eye stared unblinking, the mind unable to register anything but acute fear, and the body unable to move because of blind terror.

The overpowering compulsion alone forced the wasted limbs to act on their own, and the body moved automatically toward the terrible wall. Indeed, the creature now moved faster than before, the compulsion impelling it on more urgently with each passing moment. When the gigantic red sun set beyond the restless sea, and all became shrouded in an incredible darkness, only the dim amber lights on the anchors gave the blackness any relief. Sometime after the sun had set, the creature stopped and fell into an exhausted and fitful sleep as it hung alone in the darkness.

The creature awoke with a start, having derived little rest from its troubled sleep. Mechanically, the little hands began to work

with the anchors, while the mind slept in a dull hazy nothingness. Throughout the cold, windy night, it traveled, too tired to feel the chills causing it to shiver violently.

Suddenly there were no more anchor holds. Whatever attracted the anchoring devices to the wall was gone, but the creature continued to probe with a chilling sense of rising panic.

Shivering and afraid, the creature hung for short moments that seemed an eternity. Again it probed the area for another anchorage, finding nothing. The mind's dull panic climbed a notch as the creature hung in the blackness, but the blind compulsion again overrode it, and the hand began probing the area above the last anchor hold.

The amber light flickered on as the device connected with the new mark, and the forlorn figure weakly pulled itself up to the anchor. The next anchor connected above that, and the creature began to climb straight up, ever so slowly in the darkest hours before dawn. The damp chill of the ocean air moved over the wall as the morning sky began to lighten.

Dew formed on the surface of the black wall and trickled down in small rivulets. The dry tongue licked eagerly at the wet surface, thirstily drinking in the life-giving water.

Nels Senior stood uneasily outside the Chief Warder's office, noting his chronometer read 07:00 hours. Even in his reluctance to see Feral Han, he was still prompt, as his discipline dictated.

The warder's secretary admitted him into Feral Han's private office after the proper exchange of etiquette. There he stood quietly and respectfully at attention, waiting for the warder to address him.

Feral Han sat easily behind his exquisitely polished ebony desk, studying the report his courier had given him the evening before. Then he looked up at Nels as if surprised. "Ah! It's good of you to come, Nels. Please sit down and make yourself comfortable." He waved toward one of several leather chairs.

Nels settled back in the well-cushioned black leather chair, and tactfully appraised his surroundings as Feral continued scanning the report in front of him. The office, while extremely functional with the most modern administrative equipment, was beautifully decorated with tastefully elegant furniture in black and gold. Leafy plants and statuettes artistically decorated the room.

Nels was acutely aware the chief warder sat before him, awaiting his report. The papers in front of Feral Han obviously contained the facts, which disturbed Nels.

"My lord, I do not yet know the specifics, but we have misplaced one of our children's game trophies. I've personally rechecked all our available data concerning the game, with no conclusive results. I've also had the trophy pens and the children's playground completely scoured for the creature. Finally, I've checked each of the 399 tagged trophies, myself, in order to verify identification. One of the trophies is definitely missing."

"Do you think there might have been a mistake during the transfer of trophies from our facility to yours?" Feral asked politely, already knowing the answer.

"No, my lord," Nels responded firmly. "We accounted for the trophy in each of six headcounts prior to its release onto the playground."

"Well, then, Nels, perhaps you should refresh me as to the details of the hunt." Feral leaned back comfortably in his padded chair, the crisp leather crackling.

"Yes, my lord. The game began at 06:00 hours three days ago, on the 22nd, with the release of exactly 400 pre-counted trophies onto the children's playground. They were given the standard four hours lead time to disperse before 12 of our Colmer Lord's younger children began their 40 hour game at 10:00 hours.

"During the game, the children, all under 12 years of age, were to operate unsupervised and as a team. They played until sundown which occurred at 20:30 hours, and camped overnight in pup tents. The next morning they continued their game until 20:00 hours, the preset time limit. Each of the children was armed with one M-10 H.E. electron-beam-rifle, one Wellings laser pistol, and one hunting knife. After each kill, the owner of the trophy was to tag it, then continue hunting with the rest." Nels paused for a moment, took a breath and continued.

"My gamekeepers located and retrieved 262 properly tagged trophies by 24:00 hours on the 22nd, and verified their proper identification prior to removing their heads for mounting. By 20:00 hours on the 23rd, they retrieved 137 more of the tagged trophies, and verified their identification. An infrared scan of the children's playground indicated that no animal flesh remained on the field, although there should have been one more trophy. That's when I

first ordered the area searched. Then I requested information from you, my lord."

Nels cleared his throat, then, continued. "After speaking with you last evening, my lord, I had the entire area scoured by my full staff of ground keepers, who made full use of infrared detectors and tracking curs. Again, we found nothing," Nels winced inwardly. "At sunrise this morning, I personally supervised the testing of the 20 meter-wide sensor strip, which runs from the castle wall, along the rim of the cliff, to the north playground boundary wall. Our AX-4 pressure probes verified that the strip functioned at its exact design setting, and was completely operational. I then had the entire grounds re-scoured electronically and again with tracking curs. Once again, there were no results."

With a slight wave of his hand, Feral gestured for a pause. "Pardon me, Nels, but after hearing your most interesting report, I'm a bit mystified as to why you asked for the trophy's ID profile last evening."

Nels shifted in his seat. "My lord, our infrared scanners detected absolutely no animal flesh on the playground, either dead or alive. Neither our upper wall sensors nor our cliff edge pressure strip indicated any activity had taken place. Therefore, I needed to know if this particular trophy was capable of flight, or even possibly leaping over extended distances." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "but it turns out this trophy was some sort of off-breed that is, at its very best, weak and lacking in either mental or physical endurance. It was also badly diseased and malnourished, as are most of the smaller children's trophies." He paused a moment, then continued, "as much as I care to speculate, my lord, I suspect the creature might have been just small and light enough to avoid triggering the sensor strip at the cliff's edge. The ID profile indicated the trophy's normal body density is 40 percent less than the trophy norm, and in essence, both the tissue and bone composition are of a light density and weight. This could be a contributing factor to its disappearance, for it may have fallen over the cliff and into the ocean below."

Feral listened quietly until the gamekeeper had finished, his hands folded in contemplation. "Have you taken appropriate precautions in the event that it may have escaped over the outer barrier wall?"

"Yes, my lord. I have search teams operating outside the wall now, and I have also scheduled the sanitation craft to sterilize the cliff's face from the castle wall to the north for 30 kilometers. This will, of course, include the playground and a 20 kilometer-wide strip around it as well," he added.

Feral nodded, then, looked at the report again, musing over the contents. Nels surreptitiously checked his chronometer.

"The craft is scheduled to begin its sanitation sweeps at 10:00 hours, which is exactly two hours and 24 minutes from now."

Feral leaned back in his chair again. His voice assumed a subtle, but telling hardness, "I sympathize with your dilemma Nels, and I find merit with your speculations. However, the situation is clear. A detainee, regardless of its weakness or insignificance, is unaccountably missing. It must be accounted for," he paused, as if for effect. "You realize our Lord on High, Sweet Sargon, will tolerate no less."

Nels felt a sharp chill at that, but forced himself to meet his superior's gaze.

Feral's voice softened a bit, but the hard gleam still shone in his blue eyes. "I'll allocate 600 warder personnel and 40 surveillance craft to aid your search. Will you need anything else, Nels?"

Acknowledging the dismissal, Nels fluidly arose and replied, "no, my lord. I thank you most humbly for your generous aid." With that, he performed the customary half-bow, turned, and left the office. He was still troubled, but truly grateful for the chief warder's aid.

Feral rose and poured himself a cup of spiced tea. Returning to his seat, he sipped at the aromatic liquid as he reflected on the discussion. Could any creature have really passed over the sensor strip without activating it? He would have to check this out, and present the results through the proper chain of command to the Lord on High, Sweet Sargon.

Feral had no qualms about assisting a fellow officer. After all, both were responsible for the disposition and accounting of all detainees, whether alive or not. Sweet Sargon expected perfection from all of his loving and devoted subjects, as was his due; therefore, wholehearted cooperation was absolutely necessary in such a situation as this. Only in this way could the proper results come about.

The lone figure continued climbing upwards, pausing only to lap at the streams of dew. As it stopped, it suddenly realized it was now on the edge of the monstrous black wall and far above the top of the cliff.

The creature shivered; the wall seemed almost alive, radiating some hidden essence that extracted the life's energy out of whatever touched it. The creature could sense, rather than feel, minute vibrations and movements of some dark presence, and a new fear clouded its vision as it continued to climb.

The creature lapped more water, afterward daring to look down. The ocean was so far below that the huge swells now looked calm and smooth. The shivering body teetered in fright at the awesome sight, but the blind compulsion forced it to move upward again.

The creature progressed slowly since it was now so weak from exhaustion and hunger that its scrawny limbs could barely move. The alien compulsion drove the body on, however, while the mind receded into a haze of dull sleep. The grey hands attached an anchor to an attraction spot, and removed the lower anchor before the body sluggishly pulled itself up to attach the next anchor. The work was hard, and already strained muscles wrenched and cramped with each effort.

After moving only a short distance, the figure stopped again, panting in exhaustion. The eye looked upward and saw the bottom of an overhanging ridge thrust out from the surface of the vertical wall. The ridge ran horizontally, parallel to the wall, until it disappeared from sight. The overhang reached far out from the wall, and the creature was now in its shadow.

As the eye took the overhang in, something deep within the sleeping mind clicked, and the body began to move upward again, with some hidden source of renewed energy.

The frantic climb continued, the exhausted figure's limbs stretching and straining with the newfound endurance. The creature could dimly hear its own grunts and whimpers with each agonizing movement, but the sounds meant nothing to it, and hand over hand, the body moved upwards without pausing.

Soon the figure had reached the base of the roof-like overhang. Within its immense shadow, where the rays of the red sun could not reach, all was dusky and dark.

The eye looked up at the underside of the huge overhang. The unreflective black surface stretched out at a rising angle for 100

meters. Unknown to the creature, the wall continued to rise vertically for another six kilometers until it branched out into another overhang, and then up much higher to a third. This first overhang, which the eye could not see above, was three kilometers above sea level. The top of the wall was 15 kilometers further up.

The grey, scaly hands probed above the curve of the overhang for another anchor hold, found it, and attached the third anchor. Now hanging from the strong straps much as a spider does from its web, the creature quickly discovered that using all three of the devices was much easier than just two.

The creature moved steadily along the overhang until it had gone about 20 meters out from the vertical wall. Suddenly, there were no more anchor holds. The body hung for a few moments, probing the overhang in every direction as far as the arm could reach. An upwelling of paralyzing panic surged up in the creature's mind as it discovered no more anchor holds.

The eye mechanically probed the area without any conscious reason. First it scanned as far as it could see, then looked more carefully. It spied a dark narrow slot, nearly invisible in the shadows. The slot was just alongside the middle suspending anchor.

Compulsively, the hand reached for the object hanging on the golden chain around the neck, and held it up to examine it. The object was a thin, metallic card. On impulse, the creature inserted the device into the slot. It fit perfectly.

The creature had no idea of what it was doing, or why. While acting much as an innocent bystander, the barely conscious mind watched passively as the body climbed until exhausted, and dimly marveled as the hand inserted the card into the blackness of the overhang.

Smoothly, and soundlessly, a long narrow hatch slowly swung down from the overhang, stopping at a 70 degree angle. It was about half a meter thick, and the hatch was made of the same black cold substance as the rest of the wall. Its surface area was about one by 1.5 meters, with a step-like protrusion at the end and a ladder stretching its length.

The compulsion caused the creature to climb onto the hatch and rest its boots on the step. Now laying flat against the inner surface of the open hatch, the eye peered over the edge, seeing the white crests of huge waves crashing far below. The grey hands

instinctively tightened around the sides of the ladder-like device, and the body involuntarily winced.

When its initial fear had lessened, the creature impulsively disconnected the three anchors and placed them on a ladder rung at chest level. It gasped for breath with a sharp intake of air, for its now thoroughly strained muscles suddenly began to cramp from overuse. As the exhausted body shook in pain, the creature intertwined its arms in the rungs of the ladder and held on in desperate fear. It sensed this was the end of the long journey, but had no idea what to do next.

The eye looked up above the hatch, and an amber light by the hinge caught its attention. It dimly remembered pushing the lights on the anchors and achieving results, so the creature pressed this one. The glowing light blinked out, and for a moment nothing happened. Then the hatch moved so quietly the creature was unaware it had begun to close until its span of sight lessened. Then the hatch closed and locked with a dull thud.

Slowly, the 250,000 ton sanitation craft, CR609, moved over the top of the enormous black wall and descended to within one kilometer of the restless ocean's dark waves. Moving along the face of the formidable wall, towards the cliff bordering the children's playground, the silvery ship looked like a insect as it flew alongside the black surface.

One kilometer before it reached the beginning of the low cliff, the sanitation vessel focused a wide-angle high-radiation beam against the wall and slowly progressed northward. The deadly radiation killed all living organisms on the exposed surfaces of the cliff and beach almost immediately.

Thirty kilometers to the north, the silvery vessel turned and began sanitizing the horizontal surface at the cliff's rim, working its way inland with systematic overlapping swaths of high-intensity radiation. An hour later, nothing alive remained on the cliff's face, the children's playground, or the sanitized areas surrounding it.

Chapter 2

Inside

Compulsion, unsupported by reason, is difficult to understand by itself and can be easily attributed to an accident of chance or some other rationale. However, overriding compulsion following an intricate and well-defined path begs the question . . . who or what is behind it?

09:50-24 SHABIN 6610-6N5

The creature lay unmoving on the hatch, which had become part of the floor of a dimly lit room. It breathed with shallow gasps as the mind slumbered in a soothing nothingness. Too weak from overwhelming exhaustion, the creature couldn't move from the uncomfortable ladder.

After a time, the prostrate figure slowly became aware of an insistent pain gnawing deep within its entrails. The pain that persisted for many hours had never been as agonizingly acute as this. Slowly, with immeasurable will, the creature raised its head and the eye scanned what appeared to be a room. A few meters away from it, half-way up a wall, an amber colored light glowed.

The mind functioned dimly now, alternating between glimpses of reality and dreams, memories, and grey mists which had become more frequent in the past few hours. Somewhere the dull mind retained prior memories of the amber lights. This conditioning alone prompted the creature to force itself up onto unsteady feet and stumble toward the new light. The creature's boots tangled with the dragging straps and its body fell with a smack against the wall as it reached unsteadily up and pushed on the light. It silently flickered off, and without warning, the wall

onto which the body had fallen swung silently inward. The creature, in surprise as well as exhaustion, reeled and pitched forward through the open door into another room, collapsing into a heap as its leg and stomach muscles convulsed and cramped once again in agonizing pain. Behind it the door silently swung shut.

The injured mind heard an insistent beeping, which alternately seemed incredibly far away and surprisingly close. The sound was so annoying it caught the creature's attention. Once again, with the remnants of bodily control, the head raised. Across the room, a low counter protruded from the wall, and just above, another amber light blinked in time with the beeping.

The creature crawled slowly and painfully toward the counter, where the quivering hand reached up to press the light. Immediately it went out and the beeping stopped. A portion of the wall above the counter opened, dropping a clear cup. Then a stream of water filled the cup, and stopped.

Slowly the creature took the cup in both trembling hands. It gingerly placed the cup to cracked, swollen lips, sipping the cool, life-giving fluid until it was empty.

When the cup was empty, the creature replaced it by compulsion. When the light appeared again, the creature weakly pressed it and received a cup of thick, blue substance. The sweet fluid eased the creature's hunger and cramping muscles, and it replaced the cup again. No other light appeared.

Fatigue overcame the exhausted body, which crumpled onto the floor and slept.

The creature awoke in the dimly lit room with a feeling of disorientation. As if sensing that the body had awakened, the amber light blinked on. The eye looked fitfully around the room, settling on the light above the counter.

The creature struggled to sit up with stiff and incredibly sore muscles, the grey hand reaching up to press the light. This cup again had water, and after drinking it, the creature received the blue fluid again. After finishing, the exhausted creature slept again.

The creature went through this routine six times, but the seventh cycle was different. After the creature finished the water and pressed the amber light, it received a cup of a sweet brown substance, and afterwards, more water.

The change didn't interest the creature. It was immediately sleepy after the meal and uncomfortable because it still wore the cloak, boots and belt. The weary figure weakly pulled off the articles and pushed them aside, not noticing their rancid smell. Then it lay down on the floor again, and slept dreamlessly.

It awoke with a start. Cramping and painfully churning entrails caused the little body to double up in agony, and the creature cried out in short, violent moans and squeaks. An alarm insistently beeped in the corner of the room to the left of the entrance, and when the cramping dulled for a few seconds, the eye looked around. A bright amber light blinked next to a low, squat box with protrusions on the sides. The creature crawled to it with increasing urgency. The body painfully climbed atop the seat, which had a round hole in the center, and braced itself against the high armrests. Then a dim memory prompted the creature to turn and press the lit button. The light blinked out, but nothing happened.

The creature sat, trying not to double over and fall because of the heavy, sharp cramps. It sat for only seconds before its bowels rolled and moved violently. Clutching its swollen belly, the creature emitted weak whimpers and moans at the painful churning in its stomach. Then a stream of putrid waste filled the interior of the stool.

The creature gasped, for the room was suddenly permeated with a foul, noxious odor, causing its senses to spin wildly. Again its body cramped, and again it defecated painfully. Then the creature cried out in pain as burning water passed from its swollen bladder through sensitive tissue into the basin.

The figure fell forward onto the floor in a heap. The stool made a purring sound, and a current of cool air cleared the room of the foul odor.

The creature began to fall asleep on the floor, but dimly heard another alarm. The head moved on the wobbly neck, and saw another amber light flashing persistently beside a large closet across the room. The body slowly crawled over and forced itself to reach for the flashing light. The grey hand pressed it, and a door slid open.

The creature stumbled into a chamber, the door closing silently behind it. Immediately, a soft spray of warm water played over the trembling body, engulfing it from head to toe in a gentle stream. The shivering figure squealed in surprise, for the gentle water

stung its battered and torn skin. But soon its warmth soothed the aching muscles, and the creature felt its first sensation of something pleasant.

After a short time the water stopped, and was replaced by warm jets of air that dried the wet body. Then the door slid open and the creature stepped out, refreshed for the first time it could remember. It stood unsteadily, looking around the room, but suddenly fatigued, it lay down to sleep.

The creature repeated the new routine, of drinking water and thick nourishing fluids, defecating, showering, and sleeping often. Shortly after, brown loaves of bland tasting bread were added to the creature's diet which helped it gain strength. As the body began to recuperate, the routine became less painful.

The creature finished the first loaf, then, slowly nibbled at the rest of them. From then on, the bread became a regular part of the creature's food routine.

Once again the routine was broken. The creature had eaten, relieved itself, and showered, but had no inclination to sleep. The eye was attracted by an amber light on the wall to the right of the creature's original entrance. The light beckoned with a unique brightness, arousing its curiosity. Cautiously, it approached on much stronger legs, and pressed the light with its right hand. The light blinked out and a door silently opened.

A strong compulsion, rather than curiosity, prompted the creature to pass through the door. It began to shuffle along a downward sloping tunnel.

The passageway was dimly lit and cool. Formed within the monstrous black wall, the cold dark surface was somehow vibrant with an alien life, both dormant and haunting. The frail figure shivered, feeling the persistent tug of some un-nameable intelligence.

Unable to see well in the dim light, it moved slowly. The strong compulsion forced it to move faster down the long grade as alien feelings closed in upon the slowly awakening mind.

Suddenly the tunnel ended with a shining amber light, otherwise, the creature would have turned and fled. The grey hand pressed the light without hesitation, triggering another door. It revealed a dimly lit room.

The creature entered, the door closing silently as the light increased to a comfortable level. Then it looked around the chamber with a newfound interest. A large, ornate table with a chair sat in the middle. At the far wall stood a single closed door, and on the long right-hand wall were three other closed doors, about three meters apart. A low food counter and a three by four meter, oddly shimmering mirror, dominated the left-hand wall.

The figure walked to the mirror and saw what was, obviously it's own reflection. In the mirror's soft blue glow appeared a pathetically emaciated image, with scaly grey skin and dark, stringy hair on an oversized head. The body was small and spidery in appearance, with knobby joints and little, bony hands and feet. Narrow, shallow hips protruded out, bordering a swollen, distended belly, while the ribs, shoulders, arms and legs were devoid of fleshiness. The skin was grey and scaly, covering the body much like a loose, spongy fabric. One thing was obvious: the creature was female. This much the creature knew within herself - she was a little, old-looking and emaciated girl-child.

She looked at her face with a sense of awe, seeing it had one eye, a tiny nose with two nostrils, and a small mouth with puffy lips. Two little, pointed ears peeked out of the long stringy hair that was such a dark-red as to be almost black. She opened her mouth and saw a coarse grey tongue and two rows of small, white teeth. She ran her tongue over them, feeling their hardness, then touched them with her fingers.

Then the single eye looked closely at itself, and saw that it was rather large in comparison with the other features on the face. A dirty yellow bordered the large deep red iris, or pupil; they seemed to be one and the same.

The girl looked at herself in wonder. Somehow, the eye and white teeth suggested a subtle hint of beauty in her otherwise pathetically grotesque appearance.

The child noted a flabby grey growth where another eye should have been. She looked at it closely and cautiously touched it with bony fingers. Then, by some instinct, she gently picked at the edge of the growth, and gave it a slight tug. The pulling peeled it slightly away from her cheek, so she tugged harder. Suddenly, the growth pulled away from her face with a sharp pain as a yellow liquid sprayed on her hand.

She instinctively let go for a moment. A mixture of thick, yellow fluid and blood oozed from the exposed, stinging raw skin. She pulled at it again, loosening more of the spongy tissue, and repeatedly tugging, and finally removed the entire growth from her face. Now she saw another eye, but it was sealed shut with thick mucus. The girl dropped the flabby growth onto the floor, instinctively knowing to leave the eye alone. She felt no real pain, only a dull stinging sensation.

She looked around the room and noticed an amber light shining above the counter. She went over to it, and after pressing the light, received a meal of liquids.

After the child finished her meal, she looked around the room again. She had no inclination to use the stool or shower, especially since neither were in view. She wasn't really tired yet, just somewhat excited, so she decided to explore.

The child went to the table and tugged the chair out. She settled herself on it and examined it.

The table was long, with a cleared space before her. Boxes on either side of the tabletop had mirror-like screens, while another flat box was surfaced with square buttons like the amber lights she'd seen before. These didn't shine, and when she pressed one she heard a click and a low crackle. Simultaneously, one of the two screens displayed a pinprick of light which blinked out. Nothing else happened when she pressed it again.

The girl pressed more of the buttons, but nothing happened. She decided to explore the doors instead, first opening the single door at the end of the room. The room beyond contained a number of strange-looking objects, but she couldn't fathom their purposes. As she passed through the door, the room lighted. Then she touched some of the strange objects, which were of all sorts of queer shapes and sizes.

Nothing really interested her there, so she exited, the room immediately darkening as she left. She moved to the end door on the long wall opposite the mirror.

This room contained a stool, a shower, and a sink inserted about chest-high below a mirror. An amber colored light shone beside the sink which the girl pressed. The sink automatically filled with water.

Amazed at the device, she dipped her hand into the water. It was cool and pleasant to the touch. She looked at it for a moment, then into the mirror, seeing the still closed eye.

She wet her hands and carefully applied the water to her closed eye. At first it stung, but as she continued the pain receded. She slowly washed away the remnants of the yellow fluid and grey growth, then, stopped.

The water immediately drained, the sink refilling with warm water that felt as if it contained a different substance. Again the girl washed the eye, and after only a few moments, the mucus material softened and washed away.

As the second eye opened, the sudden light sent a sharp pain through it, and the girl instinctively covered it with her hands. Then she cautiously spread her fingers a little to let a bit of light through, and the eye didn't hurt. She continued to spread her fingers until the eye adapted to the light, then removed her hands.

She could see through it! Her vision wasn't quite clear, but she could see through both eyes. The perspective was a bit different and everything appeared clearer.

The girl looked at her face now, which looked more balanced with both eyes visible. The two eyes matched, and she looked deep into them, feeling almost swallowed up by the dark iris-pupils.

She felt dizzy, and sank to the floor, slightly nauseated. The little body shook with nervous reaction to the past few hours, while above the sink emptied automatically.

After a short time, the girl rose unsteadily to her feet and left the room, suddenly fatigued. She saw the middle door on the long wall, and felt drawn to it. Still a little dizzy, she slowly pushed it open, revealing a room with a closet and an odd-looking low counter. She found that the counter was soft, especially the bulge across one end. Then, on impulse, she lay upon it, with her head on the bulge. In seconds she fell fast asleep.

The child awoke to a soft, melodic sound emanating from the walls. She lay still for a while, listening to the unfamiliar, but pleasing sounds, then arose, her empty stomach rumbling with hunger. She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling the softness of the covers on which she had slept, then slowly stood, and entered the main room. Over the food counter shone an amber light, and after pressing it she received her entire meal on a tray.

On impulse, she sat at the table to eat, and carefully balancing the light tray, placed it on the tabletop. When she had finished she returned the tray to the counter, then went immediately to the bathroom to clean up.

She reentered the main room and went directly to the large mirror, which fascinated her. Her unfamiliar reflection, seemed to waver, and she noticed the third door on the wall behind her. Curious, she walked to it and tried the handle. Nothing happened.

The girl examined the door closely, soon losing interest because it wouldn't open. She decided to go back to the room in which she had slept, hoping to hear the nice sounds again.

For what seemed like a long time, the child repeated the simple cycle of eating, relieving bodily wastes, showering, and sleeping, all at the command of the amber lights. During this period, she gained weight and added flesh to her body and limbs. She also slept most of the time. Only once did she dream, and that was oddly real. In her dream, she walked to the locked door next to her bedroom and entered a room with only a bed and an odd box next to the wall. She remembered nothing more about the dream, so she soon forgot about it. When she was not sleeping or following the rest of her routine, she either played with the instruments on the table, which did not work, or lay, on her comfortable bed, listening to the soothing melodies coming from the walls.

The girl awoke to the familiar music and after stretching, rose and entered the main room to draw her meal from the counter. By habit, she sat at the ornate table where, facing the mirror, she could watch her own reflection and thus not be alone. She didn't realize, of course, that she was alone, for she had no memory of any other living beings.

She sat at the table, eating the sweet but bland food and looking into the mirror. Suddenly, the mirror rippled and the girl gulped her bite, coughing on it. A soft shimmer of dancing lights coursed over the mirror's surface, so she could no longer see her own reflection. Slowly, while she watched with her mouth open, the random light patterns faded back into the reflection of her main room.

But! A most singular being now sat on the child's own chair. She, for it was a lovely woman, was apparently eating a meal as well.

The girl caught her breath, watching with saucer-like eyes as the figure moved. The woman's mouth rose at the corners, revealing beautiful white teeth. The wide pink lips moved slightly, and the girl heard a soft sound like 'hell-lo'. With this, the woman nodded her head gracefully. Then she raised a cup of water and her mouth moved: 'wah-ter'. After sipping the liquid, she lifted a small brown loaf, and the girl heard 'bred'. This the figure ate slowly, while identifying the similar components of her meal.

The woman continued naming the other articles, including the tray. The girl puzzled over this for a few seconds, then looked back up. The woman rose and walked to the reflection of the girl's food counter, although it wasn't quite a reflection since the counter was on the same wall as the mirror. She faced it and said, "Water please," and the counter immediately produced a clear cup of water. The woman took the cup and said, "thank you." Then she looked at the awed girl, before continuing the lesson with other articles of food.

Much later, the mirror changed into random patterns of shimmering light, then, cleared, focusing again on the child's reflection.

This was the first of many speech lessons. The amber lights never again appeared, and nothing was produced or done unless the girl asked for it and thanked the medium for the result. Meanwhile, the figure in the mirror became her teacher and her sole companion.

Five years passed swiftly, and child grew into a young woman of about 15 years, although she didn't know her exact age. She could feel her body developing from the exercises in the gymnasium, which was the large room with so many strange-shaped objects, and a regular, highly nutritious, if somewhat monotonous, diet.

The girl spent much of her time in lessons with her teacher in the shimmering blue mirror, which had begun when the woman judged the child's mind sufficiently recovered from the trauma clouding it when she'd first arrived. The teacher called herself "Ruby", and had given the girl the name "Miriam". Ruby was the mistress of all knowledge, and daily she imparted some of it to Miriam, who was eager for both her lessons and companionship.

During the five years, Miriam learned the language which Ruby called 'the voice of the Nashramh', and she grasped the fundamentals quickly. When Miriam first heard this name,

Nashramh, she was puzzled by its apparent lack of meaning, since the word was not yet in her very limited vocabulary.

"Ruby, what does 'Nashramh' mean?"

Ruby smiled. "The name is an abbreviation of a longer word in our language, the language of our cosmic sisterhood. The word contains both our name and the reason for our being; it is a very subtle term with meanings within meanings. But, for now you shall understand it as 'Women of Compassionate Wisdom'. Your experiences in times to come will teach you much more about the hidden meanings and shades of the word."

Miriam shrugged. "I am sorry, Ruby, but I cannot understand. What is compassionate wisdom?"

Ruby chuckled, "That, my dear, is a loaded question. The answer is something you'll be a long time in learning. But, to begin, wisdom is a product of both experience and justice, and justice cannot truly exist without compassion. These words have little meaning to you now, but in time they will." She stopped, rose from her chair, and switched on a view screen which showed more vocabulary words. Then she paused for a moment. Miriam watched this, remaining silent, although she knew that Ruby was right: the words meant nothing to her.

"Now, before I change the subject," Ruby went on, "I must add that the word, or rather the concept of compassion, is in itself a complex one, since its major components are love and respect, which are in reality constantly balanced against their opposites, disrespect and hate. Much of your education will deal with this, but for now, we'll concentrate our efforts on expanding your vocabulary."

"Remember, Miriam, we of the Nashramh, although we seem to be an ancient order to you, are really mere children in the scheme of things. Because of our inexperience, we have made, and will make many terrible mistakes, for we are only human, not gods as some primitives would believe. In time, when you have begun your duties and responsibilities you'll understand."

Miriam sighed, still puzzled. If she only knew what Ruby was talking about? Well, someday she would learn.

Miriam also enjoyed many children's songs, which added a new dimension to the language. This was usually evening work, when she and Ruby would sing together, the older woman's deeper voice

contrasting with her own sweet, high one. Ruby told Miriam she had an average voice, but it was necessary for her to know as many songs as possible. Miriam supposed that someday she would know why.

She especially enjoyed songs of distant worlds and their inhabitants. She lacked experience in life, but she made up for it in enthusiasm. Besides, Ruby showed her beautiful pictures of far-off places along with her vocabulary and language lessons.

But Miriam received other lessons from Ruby. The first of these was how to understand the meaning of time and to determine its passage.

One morning Ruby appeared as Miriam ate breakfast, and after their usual greetings, she said, "it is now 07:30 hours, the fifth day, Nashon, of the fifth month, Maren, of the Nashramh year 566,615. This is using the Argonel scale of measurement. Your desk chronometer reads this as 07:30-05 MAREN 6615-6N5. The 07:30 is the time of day, the 05 MAREN the day and month, and the 6615-6N5 is the year. The N stands for a period of 100,000 years, and the five in front of it makes it 500,000 years."

Perplexed, Miriam asked, "What is time, Ruby?"

Ruby smiled slightly. "Child, the period between when you get out of bed in the morning and return to it in the evening is sequential time, in which one thing occurs before or after another in order. Later you'll learn about nonsequential time, but for now, you must learn to both understand and measure temporal time." Seeing Miriam's raised eyebrows, she continued. "Did you know that every morning at exactly 07:00 hours you receive your breakfast? The systems in this room have been programmed to keep time, and now you must learn the same programming. Look at this table." She gestured at the low lighted screen, which displayed an enlarged table with time measurements on it.

"This table illustrates the basic units of temporal time measurement."

Miriam couldn't make heads or tails of the chart, but Ruby worked along with her until she grasped the fundamentals. Afterwards, Ruby said, "Now it's time for a snack."

Miriam laughed, and the two went to their respective service counters for sweet foodstuffs.

"Ruby, you have told me that our galaxy has billions of worlds. Do they all keep the same time?"

"Yes, despite its orbital time, if a planet or a star system integrates with one of our Nashramh confederations, it adopts our time system. This allows us to coordinate navigational and other activities properly. Incidentally, our time system began about 500,000 years ago when our sisterhood first entered interstellar space."

"Oh."

"Now, let us continue with history. . . ."

Miriam quickly learned to use the Nashramh time system. Every morning, she told Ruby the date and time, feeling a rush of pleasure each time Ruby smiled in confirmation.

She also became familiar with Nashramh history and lore. The sisterhood first began space travel a half million years ago, having since become acquainted with thousands of star networks.

Although Miriam's lessons took up much of her day, she spent several hours practicing simple exercises in her gymnasium. She worked in short spurts, rested, then, continued. This kept her body toned and in excellent physical condition, and gave her mind a rest from the intellectually taxing lessons.

Each night, Miriam tried to reflect on the day's lessons, with little success, since she usually fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Her life in these rooms agreed with her, but she was often tired because she was in a growing phase. Thus, when she had something she wanted to mull over, and knew Ruby wouldn't answer her, she ended up frustrated, for she was too busy and tired to think very much. And Ruby was often no help, for if Miriam asked a question that did not pertain to the subject at hand, Ruby would say, "You'll learn about that at a later time."

One day Miriam was studying brief overviews of several worlds when she asked Ruby, "what world did I come from?"

Ruby frowned a little, and replied, "You'll learn of your origins later, child, but for now we'll work on some planetary classification before breaking for lunch."

Miriam sighed, exasperated: she would never learn anything of real importance. She wished for the umpteenth time she could visit a place like Thebel, or Tziah, Odomah, Eretz, or the other multitudes of worlds she'd been briefed on. She wasn't unhappy with her life in these rooms, but those worlds looked so much more exciting.

She still itched to know where she had come from. This was partially because she was lonely for her own kind, although she could not describe her frustrations as such, and partially because she felt uncomfortable about herself. She spent what little free time she had at her bathroom, mirror. Her grey, scaly skin disgusted her, for it had begun to grow puffy and to sag in some places. It itched horribly, though scratching did nothing to help. It often broke out in open, running sores for no reason she could understand, which hurt and sometimes stuck to her light clothing. During these times, she showered even more frequently than usual, enjoying the feel of the warm water coursing over her body, and sometimes out of nowhere would come a dark memory of her first shower, the first time she could remember feeling a little bit good. Some of these showers had strange smelling fluids in the water, but this never bothered her.

No, she did not like her skin; the sores annoyed her and the color and texture disfigured what seemed to be an otherwise normal figure and . . . perhaps . . . face. Miriam never spoke to Ruby about this, of course, and Ruby never seemed to mind her appearance. But privately, she wished that she were pretty . . . no, beautiful . . . like Ruby.

Miriam's days ran into each other as she lost all sense of time. She read her chronometer daily, but time was only theoretical for her. Beyond short interludes for sleep, showers, and thinking in front of her mirror, her life was a routine of physical and mental education. She never thought to ask why she was being educated, since her limited experience told her this was truly normal.

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10:00-19 ELIM 6636-6N5

Thousands of light years from the tiny rooms Miriam occupied in the black wall, two old and powerful women, known as Sisters-Magum, sat together in a metal cabin aboard a Nashramh warship. They discussed events which would change the course of the Nashramh's operations for a million years to come. Both women were members of the most powerful elite in the known galaxy and one of them was about to sacrifice herself to the horrors of Sargon's hell at a distant place known to all as Samael-Borgdragon Estate.

"The voyage will take 43 years, Claren," Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor spoke in her low, rumbling voice, "and I want you to be placed in cryo-freeze for the first 40 years."

"I agree, Rinim," Claren nodded. "Now, let's have a final drink together before I leave. I want something pleasant to remember when things get raw."

Rinim poured a dark red liqueur, known as Chryssenam, into two crystal glasses. Then the two slowly sipped their last libation together. Sister-Magum Claren Demorah was to be the 'bait' in a very complex and dangerous plan. This would involve the loyalty and perseverance of an unsuspecting and innocent girl with no experience in life, other than lessons from a long-dead woman in a shimmering mirror: Miriam.

Chapter 3

Education

Living a cloistered life in her hidden rooms, conversing with a dead woman's image in a shimmering mirror, was all Miriam knew about reality. Everything was seen and heard, but not truly experienced. Time, places and events were nothing more than fantasies in her innocent mind . . . but, fantasies can be the forerunner of realities to come. . . .

07:30-28 SHABIN 6640-6N5

Miriam set her breakfast tray on the desk and waited for Ruby. She wondered what kind of never-never land Ruby spent her nights in, and what she did there. Oh, well, maybe Ruby would tell her someday.

She studied herself in the mirror, seeing a healthy specimen except for the puffy skin. It had been 30 years since she'd first seen her reflection, that of a battered and skeletal child without memories. Now she was healthy and well educated, but still without prior memories.

Ruby told Miriam she was tall for her race, about one and a half meters. She smiled inwardly; Ruby's reflection appeared much taller, dwarfing her.

Miriam stared at her grey, puffy, and loose skin with a grimace; she felt so grotesque in comparison to Ruby's soft, skinned appearance. Today she wore her usual one-piece coverall robe, which was green this week and floppy sandals on her feet. The clothing had at first been uncomfortable to her sensitive skin, but the material was so soft it had soon become easy to wear.

Miriam nibbled at the corner of her bread roll, waiting expectantly as the mirror swirled into the reflection of her living room, but with Ruby in it. Ruby sat with her breakfast in front of her, a habit she had acquired to make Miriam more comfortable.

"Good morning, Miriam. Are you ready for some new lessons?"

"Yes, thank you. Good morning Ruby," she responded without hesitation, knowing Ruby expected precisely worded answers. Inwardly, she tingled with curiosity about the new lessons. Until now she'd been thoroughly trained in Nashramh history, lore, oral expression and communications, as well as etiquette. Informally, she'd learned to read subtle expressions, and right now Ruby looked slightly disturbed.

The older woman removed a sapphire recording crystal from her desk and inserted it into the repro-magnification unit. The mirror on the wall behind Ruby swirled and lit up. It showed an aerial view of a hideous black structure surrounded by huge, unreflecting black walls. One wall faced a dark, churning sea, and low cliffs. Everything, including the cliffs, was dwarfed by the black structure.

"Miriam," Ruby began without preamble. "This fortress, called Samael-Borgdragon by its inhabitants, controls this world. These rooms are located within the left corner of the seaward wall." The picture zoomed in onto their corner with a whizzing sound. Ruby paused for a moment, at the shocked and puzzled expression on Miriam's face.

Again the picture zoomed inward, this time focusing on a portion of the wall above sea level.

"For instance, the walls rise 18 kilometers above sea level, and extend 4.5 below." The aerial view focused on another portion of the black wall, with schematic information highlighted.

"The base of the wall is 7.6 kilometers thick, and narrows to a 4.6 kilometers at the top. Each side is 75 kilometers in length, constructed of a continuous, unbroken material which is resistant to natural forces."

"Incredible," murmured Miriam, awed by the terrible size of the black fortress. Her hands were wringing themselves, but she was too fascinated to notice her nervous reaction.

Ruby gestured at the screen, which now showed several large diagrams and floor plans in succession. "The interior has 1,500 levels, containing a total of 3,000,000 rooms. The total surface

area is 5,625 square kilometers, and the volume is more than 126,500 cubic kilometers. This," and Ruby gestured to a glossy, lifelike aerial view, "is how the original fortress looked."

The picture was replaced by another, which showed a superstructure of graceful buildings, forests, lawns and roadways built atop the deck.

"This is a complex of luxury cities and a major space-port," Ruby added, pointing out the various functional systems powering and operating the massive complex. "You can see four cargo carriers at the south end of the space-port. They supply the citadel with operating materials and personnel. The north end landing pad is reserved for the masters of the Estate."

"Who built this?" Miriam asked in wonder, with a growing sense of unease. She was bewildered by the vastness of this giant - no, monstrous - citadel. The total area of her five rooms put together was no more than 300 square meters, and she simply couldn't comprehend an area of 5,625 square kilometers.

Something bothered Miriam, something she couldn't put her finger on. There was an incredible wrongness about the mammoth black structure, something permeating even her rooms. The citadel was entirely alien to its external environment, and seemed poisonous with its blackness and creeping domination. Just looking at the aerial views of it terrified her.

Ruby answered the question with an odd undercurrent in her precise voice. "The Lords of Adam Belial, of whom you will learn later, built this vile place by the forced labor and deaths of countless slaves. This is only one of three great fortresses built by the alien technology of the black ones. They are located on uncharted worlds at the rim of our galaxy, and are Belial's bases to infiltrate our galaxy." She paused a long moment, then continued. "This you must understand, Miriam. Despite their apparent immensity, they are only the beginning foundations of a massive invasion yet to come."

Miriam's throat suddenly felt dry, and she sipped nervously at her water. She couldn't really understand the implications of what Ruby had just said, but something deep inside of her had seemed to twist in a helpless, skulking fear.

Ruby gestured at the screen. "This facility is by far the largest of the three, and the only one built in the open. The enemy is confident he will conquer this galaxy, since this fortress is the

closest of the three to our own fortifications protecting this sector. The other two are hidden beneath huge mountains on worlds far from here."

"Ruby, why does this enemy want to conquer our galaxy?" Miriam knew what a galaxy was, and something of the immensity of her own.

Ruby smiled sadly. "Miriam, nobody knows enough about the black ones to understand their deep-seated motivations. They are extremely advanced, and most of our encounters with them have ended unfavorably for us. Because of this, we've been unable to reveal any tangible details on them. All we do know, from their attack and domination techniques, is that they adhere to the path of discompassionate justice. In essence, they have no respect for any form of life, and act wholly under the control of their 'god' Samael, of whom you will learn a great deal later. Why our galaxy has been chosen for conquest is unknown, even as we know nothing of the enemy's true origin." Ruby paused. "Incidentally, most of what we know we learned here, at Borgdragon."

"Does this mean they control this part of the galaxy now?"

"No. They dominate this sector of rim space, but that's a long way from control. However, each fortress is a major factor in the enemy's system of domination."

"Then why cannot the Nashramh destroy them? Or, can they be destroyed?"

Ruby smiled grimly. "You assume the power of our sisterhood. But! If we were to destroy these fortresses too soon after they were built, the enemy would simply build new ones, and we would have learned nothing from the ones we have destroyed. The time for this will come."

"But it is so big!" Miriam exclaimed.

"Nevertheless," Ruby toned.

Miriam sat back and considered the picture, unable to suppress a shudder. Then she caught sight of a light rectangular walled area, which adjoined the left-hand cliff, and faced the seaward wall. It ran inland from the sea, parallel to the wall, then, turned at a right angle to join with it.

Impulsively Miriam asked, "Is that walled area near the corner we occupy?" She pointed to it.

"Very astute of you, my child," Ruby murmured, looking sadly at Miriam. "That's the children's playground where the small

children of the elite black ones, the 'Colmer', hunt for their 'trophies'."

After a reflective pause, during which Miriam suddenly felt uneasy, Ruby continued. "You, my innocent child, were one of those trophies. You are, in fact, the only person, slave or trophy, who has ever escaped the black ones - Ever!"

"I remember nothing of the time before I came here," Miriam said slowly, with a feeling of apprehension. "Why are you telling me this now?"

The older woman answered, a little sadly, "From this day forward, your education will take on a new direction, my dear. Unfortunately for you it will be an ugly one."

Miriam studied her, wondering what Ruby meant. Her teacher had always been an enigma to her, often teaching her things beyond her childish conceptions. More disturbing, however, she often left out a vital piece of information. Miriam would try to unfold the puzzle, often failing in frustration.

Now she faced something new, something dealing with this dark fortress in which she lived. Perhaps the citadel was tied in with the reason she couldn't remember her past. She had lain awake for many a night wondering how she had come to be here, and who she was. Although she knew little about what most people felt or knew about their past lives, she felt certain there was more to her than her experiences in these rooms.

A flash of some hidden memory came to her, and she felt . . . Wind, and cold darkness, that surrounded and permeated her, and deep, deep fear.

Something important about herself was missing, some hidden thing that crept into her darkest dreams. Something even deeper, and more hateful, than what Ruby had revealed about her escape as a trophy.

Miriam jerked involuntarily as her inner mind experienced a brilliant flash so vivid it seemed to fill the room for a moment. Now it seemed Ruby was planning to tell her something very frightening and ugly, and Miriam wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

There was no hint of a smile in Ruby's eyes now. Oddly, she appeared tired. Or was it sad?

"Today, I'll begin by teaching you a new kind of physical exercise, a series of complex movements designed to prepare you to fight and kill another living being."

Miriam's mouth dropped open. She couldn't remember having ever seen another living being besides herself, except for Ruby. Once she'd tried to touch Ruby, but felt only the cool, smooth and oddly vibrant surface of the mirror.

Ruby went on. "I'll also teach you 25 different languages, three of which belong to the black ones. Finally, you will witness some of the many debaucheries and horrors occurring daily in this evil and vile place."

Miriam remained silent; she could think of nothing to say. She knew only that she didn't like the sound of Ruby's unusual prophecies.

One corner of Ruby's mouth drooped, but otherwise she held herself rigidly, keeping her pity for the child inside. "You will suffer emotionally in these upcoming years from what you'll see and hear. However, it's necessary that you experience these horrors, and learn the reasons for their being, so you won't fail in your future duties."

Miriam was dumbfounded. She had never really considered any other life than the one she now lived, with her days filled with lessons from Ruby and her physical exercises. These rooms made up the totality of her life, and she could remember nothing else. She wasn't even sure she knew what duties were; the word implied doing something, but she couldn't fathom what. Somehow the word 'duties' sounded as mysterious and frightening as the horrible word in her dreams: OUTSIDE.

Well, she would wait patiently, for she knew that as always, Ruby would tell her in time.

The first of Miriam's new lessons weren't as fearsome as Ruby led her to expect. During lunchtime they exchanged greetings and chatted until they both finished eating. Then, after she returned from replacing her tray, Miriam realized Ruby was gone from the mirror which swirled gently. She sat uneasily in her padded chair, breathing quickly in anticipation.

Abruptly the mirror cleared, showing a breathtaking aerial view of the largest luxury city of Samael-Borgdragon Estate. Miriam saw the major landing pad of the estate's spaceport in the middle of the citadel. Around the pad rose towering, graceful spires, which sparkled like crystal in the rays of the giant red sun.

The view quickly sped into a close-up of what Miriam recognized as an outdoor garden park. It was extensive and

covered with a fertile green lawn that was evenly cut. Planted in large patches were myriads of well-cared-for flowers, and Miriam gazed at them, wondering what it would be like to feel their soft petals.

As if out of the walls themselves, Ruby spoke. "To enhance these next few lessons, I have arranged for your benefit as many of the sensory perceptions as I can."

Miriam immediately smelled an odd, but pleasant odor, and guessed it was the mingled scents of the grass and flowers. She sniffed in pleasure as she watched the screen. A slight breeze ruffled through the flowers and willowy trees. The breeze made a soft sound as it blew.

Several people walked through the lovely garden, gently treading on winding pavements and speaking to each other softly in a language Miriam didn't know. Numerous gardens greeted the walkers quietly with an almost vacant smile and nod before returning to their slow work. The entire vision suggested a peaceful reception area where all was gentle and quiet.

The recording crystals Miriam had studied of other worlds hadn't been as lifelike as this. She felt as if she was actually present with these genteel people.

The scene shifted to another view within the lovely city. Several people strolled leisurely along a wide, intricately paved street. Most wore a simple jumpsuit or robe uniforms in muted colors, while very few, all men wore light, short tunics in bold colors. This small group walked the street together, talking and occasionally greeting one of the uniformed people.

Again the screen zoomed and shifted into another view. Huge manor houses dominated expansive grass and forest lands. Miriam briefly wondered how these people could make grass grow on the upper deck of the monstrous citadel, which she found so frightening.

As the view focused onto the house, Miriam saw intricate details of the breathtaking dwelling, then a portion of the yard adjoining it. In this garden area, several uniformed servants worked patiently on topiaries and flowers while three men reclined on low couches.

Miriam gazed at the men, and felt an unfamiliar stirring inside her. They were extraordinarily attractive, with fair hair and blue eyes. Each wore bold, short tunics which Miriam suspected

belonged to the upper-class. A lovely blonde woman, obviously a servant, waited on them.

The scene was vivid and appealing, but something subtly odd made Miriam uneasy. She couldn't define what it was, so she studied the three intently.

One of the men apparently read aloud. He finished, and the three spoke together in soft, level voices, never interrupting one another. Occasionally one gently picked up a sweetmeat and ate it with perfect manners. Miriam, who was proficient in the standard manners and etiquette of the Nashramh, felt primitive in her habits by comparison. They never spilled or spoke with a mouthful, and always touched a silken napkin to their lips after eating a morsel. Their manners were more than impeccable; they were practiced, polished, and far superior to anything Miriam had ever seen.

She watched the lovely girl-servant approach them. The girl waited until she was noticed, then gently deposited a tray holding a flask of some green liquid and three glasses. Then she bowed, nodded in assent to a comment, and left.

Miriam was still disturbed. Before she could determine the discrepancy, the screen focused on yet another scene. There was an incredibly beautiful woman, kneeling alone in an enormous apartment complex.

"Have you noticed anything, Miriam?" Ruby's voice emanated from the walls.

She thought quickly, the beauty and elegance of the scenes flashing through her mind. "This place seems to be a paradise. This does not fit with what you have told me about this fortress."

"And?"

"Everyone seems to be in uniforms," Miriam said slowly, "except for a very few. Why?"

"Every single person on this estate is a servant, Miriam," Ruby indicated. "The ones not in uniform, however, belong to the Colmer. This rank is the highest order of slaves, responsible for the most important functions of this estate. You will learn more about them later. What else have you noticed?"

Miriam scrutinized the lovely woman in the mirror, who knelt with her head down. Oddly, this was the only woman who wore the high-ranking garb of the Colmer lords. But, there was something else. . . .

"Ruby, why do all these people look the same?"

In fact, each person had individual features, but all had blue eyes and blond hair. The hair was different shades, such as pale blond, gold, flaxen, and yellow. But somehow, these people seemed different from the other races Miriam had studied, who, although they had similar racial characteristics, also had substantial individual differences. The people of this fortress all looked pretty much the same, as if created from the same mold.

"This is the only acceptable standard of appearance for the inhabitants of this citadel. All Adam Belial's servants wish to appear as much like their Sweet Gensargon as possible, since he is blond and blue-eyed. It's more than a matter of ego for them. It's a matter of necessity, and nothing less is ever tolerated."

"Tolerated by whom?" asked a mystified Miriam.

"By their lord Gensargon, and through him their liege lady Flourtiamat, whom you are looking at now. They set the example of gentility and law for their subjects, allowing nothing less than what they consider to be perfection."

"Oh. Is she powerful?" Miriam nodded to Flourtiamat on the screen.

Somewhere Ruby chuckled. "Yes. She's the only woman who has any power here, the lady of the estate and chosen consort of her lord Gensargon, who has been absent from this place for several centuries." Ruby made no attempt to discuss this fascinating subject. Instead, she allowed the scene in the mirror to fade, and began teaching Miriam more new lessons. Among these were the three languages of the estate, which in time allowed Miriam to understand the thousands of conversations and occurrences into which she eavesdropped.

After Miriam had thoroughly learned the black ones' three languages and seen more views of life in the estate than she cared to remember, she asked Ruby about the eavesdropping system. Uncomfortable about watching obviously intimate and private scenes, Miriam observed them only at Ruby's insistence. Even when she recognized the "intimacies" as physical gratifications of the masters by the slaves, she still felt vaguely embarrassed.

One day, after watching Flourtiamat in her apartment, Miriam asked, "how does this spy system work?"

"What you see and hear, in both the mirror and your desk video units, are actual present events keyed into the surveillance network of this fortress. This entire network was originally built as

a basic part of the very fabric of Borgdragon Estate. It views each and every room, hall, garden, closet, and other space built into the entire citadel."

"Does it view us too, Ruby?"

"No, Miriam, it doesn't. The entire computer system, which is an electro-organic complex of enormous capability, never sleeps and watches everything at all times. That is, everything that was designed to be in and around the citadel. Where we are now has never been known to the computer, since these rooms were built secretly after this part of the wall was completed and before the computer was installed. Everything it sees out of the ordinary is routed immediately to the security center, which is located in the lower fortress."

Ruby smiled coldly. "However, when this entire system was built over 100,000 years ago, I tapped into it, and from the very beginning merged with it. I am thus a part of it myself, and unknown to the security center. The enemy was too confident to anticipate they could be infiltrated at the very beginning. Thus, we can watch them, but they cannot watch us."

Miriam considered this for a few moments, then, asked, "how did you come to be here?"

Ruby smiled sadly. "That, my dear, is a long story. At this time it's enough for you to know that I, and many of my Nashramh sisters, voluntarily joined the countless millions of slaves who built this vile place for the enemy. I was the one who designed and built these apartments you dwell in."

"But Ruby, would the enemy not be watching for some kind of infiltration?"

"It seems the black ones expected a bold attack, if any. You see, we learned the locations of the three fortresses by accident, and because we understood the strength of the enemy, we realized that we might destroy one fortress only to find there were other secret ones. But, if we destroyed it from within through infiltration, we could learn about their technology and other secrets first."

Ruby nodded her head, as if prompted by a long forgotten memory, "Thus, it was that millions of our sisters filtered quietly into the populations of primitive worlds conquered by the black ones, becoming their willing slaves. This wall, as well as the rest of the planned citadel, was built of heavy metals brought here from Gensargon's place of origin, and mixed with both local earth

materials and a matrix of the once-living bodies of the slaves. These builders were pressed into the wall after they had completed a portion. Their bodies cemented each ten centimeter-thick layer of the black heavy metals, crushed to death beneath 10,000-ton rollers."

Her eyes now sad with distant memories, Ruby continued speaking softly. "Unfortunately, the slaves' souls as well as their bodies have been trapped within this hideous wall for the past 100,000 years. Because of the alien composition of the heavy metals, their souls were caught and held. All their bodies and souls, now merged with the alien heavy metals, are the real strength of this vile fortress. This citadel has become a living, organic thing. However, because of sacrifices by our sisterhood, this place can be destroyed. Our many sisters who became part of this wall allowed me to penetrate it and build these rooms before merging with the computer."

"Did they know they would die?" Miriam asked in wonder, a lump forming in her throat.

Again, there was the sad smile. "Yes, they did. But they also knew the risk was absolutely necessary to build these rooms and to infiltrate the computer from the very beginning. Unless our sisterhood knows more about our enemy, we can't effectively defend our galaxy against his invasion."

Miriam was astonished. Awed, she couldn't comprehend such bravery and loyalty.

"Remember, Miriam, this place is made up literally by bodies of the slaves who built it. The very means by which it will be destroyed will also come from those bodies. We've been developing those means for a very long time, and have only recently completed it."

Miriam asked what her last statement meant, but Ruby only looked sadly at her for a moment, then, abruptly began her lessons.

Most of Miriam's newer lessons came from the estate's own extensive library, the remainder from Ruby. She enjoyed many real-life lessons, for in these she learned how the elite lived, her examples being a few of the highest officers. Her only female example was the lady of the estate, Flourtiamat. Only after Miriam had observed her for a long time and compared her with other

women of the estate, did Ruby clarify the subject of the higher-ranking black ones with the child.

"Tiamat, as her subordinates respectfully call her, is the only one of her kind here at Borgdragon. What do you notice about her, Miriam?"

Miriam paused awhile, appraising Tiamat. The mirror illuminated the lady of the estate, revealing her in her personal chambers. The woman was petite, about one and a half meters tall, and well-proportioned. Round blue eyes somehow made her face seem incredibly innocent, almost childlike, while fine gold-spun hair reached her tiny waist. She was hauntingly beautiful, without any flaw to mar her delicate, softly classical features. She always wore the finest of clothes to set off her fragile beauty, but without ornamentation.

Miriam studied her in several scenes. Tiamat gave orders with a natural air of command and authority, but without a display of ego. When she entertained a guest, she was an impeccably charming hostess. When alone in her impressive apartment she was calm and poised.

Miriam watched for hours as Tiamat spent time in her quarters. The woman would sometimes sip at a liquid and listen to gentle, flowing music that made Miriam's feet tingle and want to move by themselves. Sometimes she sat at her intricately carved desk either reading or writing. However, most of the time, she simply sat alone staring into nowhere as low chanting music played in the background.

Now Miriam looked at Tiamat, who sat alone on her couch listening to some rapturous music and staring off into nowhere.

"Ruby, why does she not listen to the music? I mean, with music like this, one who listens cannot help but be swayed."

As if in response, the tone of the music changed subtly so that, although it was still hauntingly beautiful, Miriam felt a small shiver race up her spine.

"This lovely creature listens to such music to enhance her mood. She spends many silent hours a day in devout prayer to her lord, Sweet Sargon, the Chosen Son of the Eternal God, Samael."

"Oh. But what bothers me, Ruby, is that when I have seen her when she does not pray, she is still is oblivious to her exquisite surroundings and beautiful music. She seems to enjoy nothing. I mean, when she is with others she is polite and sometimes smiles

or laughs," and here Miriam remembered the first time she had heard Flourtiamat laugh, like a chilling, tinkling bell. "She seems to perform the actions, not live them. It's as if there is no one in her body when she does these enjoyable things. Why is this?"

"Miriam, my child, you are indeed growing more observant. The woman you see in the screen before you is the only Qliphoth in residence at Borgdragon Estate."

Miriam frowned. "What is a Qliphoth?"

"Qliphoth is a name given by us to the female overlords of the black legions. A female, such as Tiamat, is one of a few who graduate to such a rank gaining the trust of a master of the divine bloodline of Adam Belial. Tiamat's lord is Gensargon, the Chosen Son of Samael, whom you know has been away for many centuries. In his stead Tiamat rules with absolute control over Borgdragon Estate. In this last respect, she's coldly efficient and just as ruthless as Gensargon himself. Tiamat allows nothing to interfere with her absolute rule and dictates all standards of both appearance and conduct within the estate."

"Ruby, just who is Sweet Sargon, and Samael?" Miriam asked with a sense of awe.

"First, let's begin with Samael, which is our name for him. He's a powerful intellect who was part of the beginning process of eternity, and is one of the Eternal's fundamental parts. In this respect, he's the embodiment of evil, lacking all compassion or gentle love. His goal is to dominate and control all eternity and to impose his objective standards of total uniformity on all living beings. This means all life forms and free souls daring to inhabit temporal matter. In years to come you'll learn more of what this objective and emotionless intellect really represents."

Ruby paused for a few moments and waited until Miriam had time to digest the full impact of her words. Then she continued. "Sargon is another name for one of many 'sons of Samael, who are 'Adam Belial', the ancient bloodline of destruction. He is a role model for lesser beings to emulate and follow." Ruby then spoke more slowly, "perhaps the story of his life, or more correctly his death, created by his faithful priests, will tell you more about the nature of his being."

Ruby settled back in her chair and began. "According to the story, Sargon was a mystic child born from the union of Samael and an honored priestess of the Eternal's light, named Tiamat. She

was the younger sister of another woman, whose name was Marah. Marah, also a high priestess of the Eternal's light, was brash and sought the sinful knowledge of independent thought. She asked questions no mortal has a right to think."

"But Ruby," Miriam broke in. "It is not wrong to think for oneself. You told me so."

"Ah, but this is the doctrine of the black ones, who realize those who truly think for themselves might find fault with their dogma designed to control the masses. But, you are correct; the path towards the practice of compassionate justice and wisdom opposes the belief in any dogma, for belief is the absence of critical thought and the foundation for mindless conformity. Now let's talk about the story. The sisters, Tiamat and Marah, were to sacrifice themselves to the living flames of Samael's divine will on the Feast of Cosmic Love. Marah, loath to give up her life, scoffed at this as idolatry, claiming Samael was not the Eternal, but only one small component. She refused herself to the living flames.

"Upon hearing this, Tiamat became fearful and hesitated, drawing the wrath of her loving god. Samael then began to diminish his living fire to plunge the universe into eternal darkness. It was then that Sargon, the sweet child of poverty, gave himself as the sacrifice by leaping into Samael's pyre of all-consuming flames. The smoke from his body was pure white, and from that day on, Sweet Sargon became the favored son of the Eternal God, Samael, and the light of the sun and stars remained in the heavens.

"Tiamat after recovering from her momentary panic attempted to leap into the flames. Because of her hesitation, however, she was rejected and cast back into the profane world to bear sacrificial sons for her redemption. True, she gained Sweet Sargon's favor, and in time, after many severe tests, became his only true consort, subject to his rule and trust.

"Marah the scoffer, after witnessing these proceedings, fled into the void from Samael's divine wisdom. Afterwards she endeavored to confuse and corrupt Sweet Sargon's faithful with the sin of unholy thought and forbidden questions. It was because of her that Tiamat had hesitated in fear and confusion, thus condemning all women to a status far inferior to men in Samael's eyes."

Miriam considered the story for several moments, then, asked, "Ruby, do people really believe such a story? Somehow it seems

absurd that this Samael would want anyone to kill themselves in a fire . . . and for what?"

Ruby shrugged, "who says it has to make sense, anyway? Have you any other questions?"

"Yes, right now I have one. You said the lord of Borgdragon Estate is referred to as Gensargon. Why is this?"

"Well, Miriam, from the story you should understand that 'Sargon' is just a title, or a position of some high rank. It's doubtful any such person actually existed, at least as the priests tell it. Gensargon's name is Gen, and his title of Sargon is attached to it, just as his lady's name, Flour, is attached to the title of Tiamat."

Miriam continued to study the inhabitants of the Borgdragon Estate intently. Ruby also showed her many of its computerized records and its library's extensive historical and intelligence recordings, dealing with the black legions.

Each day she saw a different phase of a specific history, and what she first saw appeared to be good and beautiful. But slowly, the overall picture changed even as she learned about the history of Tiamat and her kind. In the recorded histories, she was exposed to the dark and horrible things that brought about all of Borgdragon's great wealth.

"Miriam, summarize the effect of the black ones' take-over of a fief world," Ruby instructed.

Miriam began hesitantly, but quickly grew more confident. "Each world, whether primitive or advanced, is slowly infiltrated by agents of the black legions. They then usually destroy all vestiges of civilization on the world. Usually the most evil and cunning of the invaders attach themselves to the leadership of whatever organized groups are in control on the world, no matter what they represent. Whether chieftain, priest, or government official, the evil leader is in a perfect position to incite others to extreme actions. This divides the organizations and provokes chaos.

"Unfortunately, these evil leaders cannot effectively be weeded out. They always appear as the most loyal, upright, racially pure, and pious of champions of whatever cause they represent. Their opposition is made to look foolish and impure, and is hunted down and destroyed. There always follows an erosion of society and the reversal of values and facts until only chaotic violence remains. Thus in time, which the black ones patiently use, each world becomes the willing property of Gensargon, and its inhabitants are

taken off as slaves for his many enterprises." Miriam caught her breath.

"Yes," said Ruby. "And like the Qliphoth, there are those natives who accept Sargon as their personal god. Through deceit and treachery, they make the taking of their world easier for the black legions. If they selflessly do the bidding of their god's representatives, they are given a place in his Legions of Light so they may continue to convert other hapless populations to his way."

On and on Miriam studied countless conquered worlds. She saw burning cities, brutalized females, countless mutilated corpses, and innumerable beastly acts of the males against one another.

Finally, Ruby announced one day that Miriam had seen the last of the important histories.

"Do you have any questions, Miriam?"

"Yes," Miriam spoke slowly. "Why is it that upon each and every world the black ones occupy, the native population is always corrupted and destroyed? Each of the races is different in superficial ways, but they all seem to have been basically good in the beginning."

Ruby responded, "We are all basically good and evil. You must understand that our real reason for experiencing corporeal life, and one of our greatest problems in this universe, is to learn the differences between and the consequences of good and evil. We must, therefore, experience both in order to learn these basic lessons before we can learn other aspects of causative reality."

Miriam sat puzzled for awhile, then shrugged. "I do not completely understand, Ruby."

"Well, for instance, to learn the value of love, respect and compassion, you must naturally face their opposites, hate, disrespect, and discompassion. After all, how can you know what light really is if you have never been exposed to the dark?"

"Yes, I see that. But I am asking why these populations cannot learn these polarities in a less permanent way. After they are enslaved by the black ones there is no chance for them to escape, and usually they are too innocent in the first place to realize the path they are being led along."

"Miriam, I don't know the answer to that question. If I did, I would be the Eternal. I do know that Samael's sterile doctrine of

discompassionate justice is only one component of eternity. Our doctrine of compassionate justice is another. And even as our sisterhood tries to find people on young worlds to affiliate with us, the black ones do the same. But! Evil is much easier to develop than is good, for with evil, you don't have to think, or restrain your emotions. The black ones are also expert at making a person become that which he or she truly despises. They do this apparently because they desire to study the result, as well as to control all living things."

Miriam contemplated this for several moments, then asked, "what if the population has already learned love, respect and compassion? Can it too be corrupted?" She thought back to another world she had studied, where the population had been extremely advanced and had already chosen the path towards compassionate justice. The black ones had initiated a massive invasion, killing off the native leaders, and then shattered their intellects with mind altering drugs. The advanced personalities had been broken down into primitive, terrified minds, and the black ones set about subverting, corrupting, and conquering the world in the conventional way.

"This all depends," said Ruby. "If the target race is so compassionate that its members cannot bear to take another life, no matter how vile and dangerous it may be, they can indeed be corrupted. You see, we must learn to apply all three standards first to ourselves, then through ourselves to others. But we must also be ready to use violence to protect ourselves and others against those who are solely dedicated to evil and destruction. After all, is it more compassionate to spare a vile life which preys on many others for murderous gratification? Or, should one take it to protect many more innocent intellects who would not only meet death, but also a long, tortured eternity of slavery to the black ones?"

"Ruby, I think that I understand your point," Miriam agreed. "You mean to say that the needs of the many are more important than the needs of the few, no matter how unfair the situation may be."

"Only in some cases Miriam but not all. Each must stand on its own merits. For instance, if the needs of the many allow freedom of choice to the few who have other needs, then this might be true. But, what if the majority, are intolerant of the minority and deny

them any choice? You see, there are good majorities as well as evil ones, so we must learn how to strike a workable balance which benefits all. Until then we must protect ourselves against predatory beasts."

"But, I still do not understand how one can be both good and evil. Either one is good or one is evil."

"So it would seem," Ruby said, smiling, "but experience will tell you otherwise. One must know right from wrong, and must always strive to do what one feels is right. Unfortunately, that which may appear to be wrong at a given time and place may later prove to be what is truly right, such as my example earlier, or the other way around!" She paused for a moment, then said, "I know you cannot yet understand this, but in time you'll learn to see the many shades of grey between black and white. All needs aren't legitimate needs, and this you will learn."

After the histories, Miriam's new lessons took on a new and exciting dimension. She began learning about the classes and stages of both life and intellect, from the smallest component of the atom to the most advanced life form, and her mirror showed her myriads of examples from each category. She marveled at the countless life forms existing throughout the galaxy, and was stunned to learn that all galaxies might be similar in this respect.

Miriam also learned many other subjects, from new physical exercises, to art and literary works. She also increased her command of languages. But the overall training she received always seemed to directly or indirectly focus on the realms and ways of the black ones.

She learned the basics of known astronomy, and the fundamentals of astro-navigation. She always enjoyed this, since Ruby had designed a magnificent holographic arena for her to work in. Through this holograph, which filled the whole living room, she could see vividly colored planets and stars, and even simulations of spaceships, the design and details of which she studied intensely.

* * *

09:30-01 TALUM 6670-6N5

A thousand light years away, Sister-Magum Claren Demorah sat alone in her personal cabin, meditating and bracing herself for

the trial soon to come. It had been a long voyage to this far-off rimworld, ruled by Sargon's Legions of Light, and soon she would be left alone on its unforgiving surface with nothing but her skill and wits to protect her. Her mission was terrifying to her, but only she, and she alone, had to see it through. The 600 meter-long Nashramh scout destroyer, 'SD Ginsel-Tae', entered temporal space a few moments earlier and was about to launch the 80 meter-long fighter-lifeboat she was to board, out into the void. The five-woman crew would transport her to the grey-green world 600,000,000 kilometers away, then, return to the scout destroyer.

An alarm rang out announcing the fighter-lifeboat would be launched in five minutes. The old woman opened her eyes and rose to her feet. A sharp jolt to the vessel shook her, followed by a dull thump from somewhere far to the stern of the vessel. The ship's lights blinked out, leaving her in murky, stifling blackness - then glowing red chem-lights. A blaring klaxon sounded battle stations. They were under attack!

Claren ran for the cabin door and was nearly knocked off her feet as the scout destroyer lurched into flank speed and suddenly changed course. Struggling to reach the metal door, she pulled her environmental control hood over her head and activated the facemask's air rectifier before sliding the door open and bolting through. The corridor filled with dense smoke and further astern, she heard a rapid series of explosions that shook the ship's structure like giant sledge-hammers.

As Claren approached the port-side lifeboat's hangar, the smoke and noise almost over-whelmed her. Shrieks like the cries of wounded animals pierced the smoke-filled hangar as high-pressure effluent lines ruptured. These sent superheated streams of radioactive liquids through the machinery spaces behind the next bulkhead. The ship's frame twisted and strained under the terrible force of her battle maneuvers. Claren could hear the sharp snapping of torpedo and thermal mine accelerators on both sides of the small destroyer, as hundreds of lethal missiles shot out to do battle with the enemy.

"This way, My Grace," a muffled voice sounded beside her. Strong hands grasped her shoulders and guided her quickly through the smoke-filled hangar. "We have only a minute or two before separation."

As the two women approached the fighter-lifeboat's outer airlock, Claren glimpsed the open machinery hatch of the engineering and propulsion section. Violent flashes of white light pierced the dense smoke, accompanied by loud reports of terrible hammering explosions. In the inferno, a single figure struggled to pull an armless human body through the hatch. The figure laid the corpse beside three other crumpled bodies, then, returned into the inferno.

"Get into the airlock, My Grace. We haven't any time!"

The outer hatch slammed behind Claren. The grey-uniformed security woman who'd pushed her inside depressed a red button beside it. Instantly, the small craft shot out and away from the Ginsel-Tae, immediately dropping into the first sub-binary plate.

As soon as Claren's fighter-lifeboat cleared the ship, the Ginsel-Tae pulled around and pressed her attack against the giant black warship that had ambushed her.

Sister-Captain Olan Duan controlled the Ginsel-Tae's helm from the beginning of the attack. She fought to gain time for her fighter-lifeboat's launch, but now it was time to fight back.

Unlike the Galactic Common Confederated Navies, who fought protracted battles by running and maneuvering, the Nashramh never started a fight, but fought like mad hornets until either they or the enemy were dead. The Nashramh never asked for, nor accepted any quarter once a fight had begun. Thus, although critically wounded, the 600 meter-long Ginsel-Tae pressed her attack against a 200 kilometer-long enemy battle cruiser.

"We're losing our impulse units," shouted a voice from the propulsion section. "We only have our 120-second chem-thrusters, and that's it."

"Switch them to my trigger and verify," the Captain answered coolly, "I don't want any screw-ups."

"Switchover verified, Captain."

"Say your prayers, we're going in."

Olan studied her curved grid screen carefully, noting the exact location of the enemy warship's primary reactor spaces. Then, letting her breath out slowly, she spoke into her comm-link. "Discharge all ordnance, now!"

The pounding of explosions from astern were joined by shuddering salvos of thermal mines and torpedo canisters fired by all working launchers. The forward laser generators fired

continuously as the Ginsel-Tae glided toward the black battle cruiser. Aside from the enemy's first direct hit, he hadn't been able to connect with the dodging Nashramh vessel again, though his batteries sent out thousands of massive laser impulses.

Pressing the chem-thruster trigger, Olan braced herself while the Ginsel-Tae shot forward toward the distant enemy vessel. Her lasers and other ordnance fired until the final second. The massive explosion of her Nobles XIX Sub-Binary Drive Unit lit up the void, then, receded into an expanding cloud of deadly ions just 300 kilometers from the enemy vessel. Only 206 torpedo canisters and 50 thermal mines penetrated the black warship's battle screens and tore into the exposed hull around his armored propulsion section. The resulting explosions caused secondary detonations, completely disabling the giant battle cruiser, and ending the short engagement after only ten minutes. The Ginsel-Tae's casualties were 29 dead, out of a crew of 34 officers, technicians, and one passenger. The enemy's losses were 12,410 of Sargon's faithful warriors . . . but then, they were expendable.

The 20-day voyage to Koven-Ent II was difficult and wore everyone down. The fighter-lifeboat had been damaged before ejecting from the Ginsel-Tae, and the five crew members with their passenger were hard-pressed to keep all of the life-support systems in working order, while effecting extensive repairs to the outer surface of their vessel at the same time. It would be impossible to land the damaged lifeboat on the grey world, especially with vertical tears in the outer skin. Three of the technicians and the security woman took turns working outside the ship, welding damaged areas and repairing the damaged control surfaces. Now it was time to land their passenger on the planet's surface for her upcoming assignment.

"Prepare for entry into the upper atmosphere on my mark," Sister-Lieutenant Gunnel Loun said into her comm-link, "five, four, three, two, one . . . mark!"

Gunnel brought the vessel's bow down and shot into the thin upper atmosphere at a 70-degree angle. The ship's battle shields, extended only three centimeters from the hull, fought to protect her from being overheated and torn apart by the thickening atmospheric gases.

"If we don't make it down fast enough, they'll be on top of us when we land," she spoke evenly over the comm-link. "Remember,

as soon as we touch down, get the hell out and run straight away from the airlock. Dig your heels in so they can't miss your trail and can follow you without trouble. Sister Demorah will go the other way and lose herself in the vegetation. Are we clear on this, people?"

Everyone affirmed the plan and made ready for their departure, checking their weapons and breathing gear. Gunnel planned to stay on board and detonate the sub-binary drive after three hours, or when the enemy breached the hull, whichever came first.

"Make distance, people. This is going to be one hell of an explosion!"

The Nashramh fighter-lifeboat broke through the low cloud-cover and immediately dropped into an area of long, rolling foothills bordering a rugged mountain range. There was hardly enough time for Gunnel to find an adequate landing spot. Luckily, she slid her craft into a narrow pasture bordered by huge broad-leaved trees. The vessel's bow caved in as it impacted against the trees. The ship's sudden and crashing stop nearly tore everyone out of their crash seats.

"Out, out, out, everyone out!" Gunnel yelled, opening the starboard airlock with remote control and shutting down the fighter-lifeboat's power systems at the same time. "Run like hell, and good hunting!"

Claren was pushed out of the smoking craft by the grey-uniformed security woman and left to her own resources as the four women ran directly away from the open airlock, leaving deep footprints in the soft ground. She then made her way forward, along the hot metal hull and past its smashed bow, into the thick forest. Increasing her pace, she moved as fast as possible, making sure her own trail would be easy to follow. After all, she was here to be captured alive!

Sister Fenel Obmar led the way through dense undergrowth, using her strength and agility to make a path for the others to follow. Three hours in this terrain wouldn't let them get far from the wreck. Besides the enemy would surround them shortly, and they would fight like hell to distract them until Sister Demorah got away. Then it would be over.

Suddenly the dense undergrowth ended. The four women found themselves next to a narrow road with five meter-wide swaths cut

out along each side of the forest. Just ahead to the left were the leading elements of a column of brown-uniformed foot soldiers.

"Hit the deck and open fire!" Fenel whispered through her face mask, "and shoot to kill!"

Before the enemy soldiers could respond, the women took out 11 while the rest were making for cover. There were enemy soldiers everywhere and the fight lasted only five minutes before the Nashramh women were dead. It wasn't really a fight, since the enemy spotted the women emerging from the tree line and opened fire. Heavy mortars with high-explosive rounds left the outcome as a foregone conclusion. Even so, the women killed three soldiers and seriously wounded eight others before being blown to bits.

Claren came across an enemy military police unit guarding a crossroad, killing six men before they saw her. Then, without bothering to push the dead radioman out of the parked vehicle, she started it and drove the opposite direction from the downed fighter-lifeboat, putting as much distance between it and her as possible. She nearly collided with an armored vehicle parked in the middle of the road as she rounded a curve. She ran over two sentries who didn't have time to get out of the way, before the chase began.

The cloudy afternoon sky lit up behind her as Claren drove her open ground car down through a narrow, deep ravine lined with thick undergrowth and solid rock sides.

"This is it," she thought to herself as something pushed her speeding vehicle off the road and into the low-lying thicket. She had no control over the car and could only watch as the vehicle slid into the thicket and down a steep incline into a three meter-wide stream. After she hit the icy water, everything got scrambled up, as she fought to stay on the water's surface. Then she lost consciousness.

"She's a high-ranking officer in the so-called sisterhood, my lord," a man's high-pitched voice sounded in the distance, "what do you want us to do with her?" Claren couldn't move and realized that she was securely bound and blindfolded. Other than that, she felt wet and sore, but not seriously injured. "Yes," the man's voice continued, "she has documents stating she's a senior admiral for their fleet operations. Yes, my lord, she is alive and undamaged. Cryo-freeze?"

Yes, my lord, immediately!"

Chapter 4

Alsis

A single scout-destroyer lost to a damaged enemy battlewagon was a small price to pay for the target we had in mind. Claren Demorah, now in enemy hands, was on her way to Borgdragon Estate and the culmination of long-laid plans. Herein other events began to unfurl, transforming Miriam's fantasies to stark reality . . . courage, she was about to learn, has many faces. . . .

07:30-18 BENEM 6670-6N5

Miriam replaced her breakfast tray and prepared for the day's lessons. For the past six months she'd been studying the Vochumtone language of Chaleach traders, and was now beginning to feel she'd captured some of its basic logic and rhythm.

She sat down at her desk and pulled her lesson disc out of a file. She placed it into her desktop computer console, looking forward to working on the tri-level hymn exercises. Before starting, she listened to the softly alien notes of music from the Chaleach.

Unexpectedly, the mirror began to swirl as it always did when Ruby came to see her. Miriam mechanically turned off her console and watched as the screen cleared, wondering why Ruby had come so early.

A moment later, Ruby appeared. Miriam saw that her teacher had a grim expression on her normally clear face; Ruby's eyes were piercing.

"Miriam, something unfortunate is about to happen in cell block 1,000-62-A, interrogation room 28. A woman, who is about to be interrogated, is one of our sisters who is a special courier.

She's been singled out and arrested as a spy suspect by the Argonite technicians."

Ruby looked intently at Miriam and spoke softly, but with steely firmness. "You are to watch the entire interrogation from beginning to end. You are not to close your eyes or in any way turn your head. You will observe and witness everything. Do you understand?"

Astonished, Miriam sat with her mouth open. Ruby had never addressed her with such grimness or force before, and now she was frightened. She had no idea of what to expect.

"Yes Ruby, I will do what you ask," she said in a small voice. Then in confusion she blurted, "What is happening? I do not know what it is that you are asking me to do."

Ruby did not answer her question, but said sharply, "Do as I've requested."

The mirror went blank for a moment, then, cleared to reveal an empty room. It was bare, and coldly sanitary-looking. In the middle, a small shallow circle indented the metal floor.

Miriam stared at the now empty room for about 10 minutes, disliking the gleaming metal walls, ceiling, and floor. She kept her eyes trained on the large door most of the time, expecting it to open. Still, she was startled when it was thrown open.

A very large woman was roughly pushed into the room, and the door closed immediately behind her. She teetered on her small feet with a dazed expression on her small-featured face.

Miriam looked at her closely, noting the woman was different from any of the inhabitants of the estate. She wasn't very tall, just under a meter and a half in height, and totally naked. Miriam noted her obesity. Her soft, white skin loosely covered rolls of fat tissue. She had large, heavy breasts, a pronounced belly, and thick arms and legs. Her hands and feet were quite small in comparison with the rest of her body although they too, were chubby. Even the woman's small face, which had an innocent-looking sweetness Miriam liked on sight, was puffy and bulgy, although one side was badly swollen and discolored. Her eyes and mouth seemed ridiculously small amidst her chubby features, and her face was framed by light-brown, wildly curling short hair.

The woman was in a panic; her small eyes darted back and forth, and she shivered as she stood unsteadily alone in the cold room. The little hands clenched and unclenched.

Miriam watched the woman, wondering what the black ones were going to do to her. Then the large door was flung open again and two huge Argonite technicians strode in, their presence suddenly dominating the room. One brandished a glowing rod-like device about a meter long while the other clenched his beefy hands in taunting anticipation.

"Stand at attention, sow!" barked the unarmed technician. "You are a spy and we know it." Without warning, he struck her full in the stomach, and with a lightning bolt blow, caught her on the injured side of her face with his other fist as she crumpled from the first. She crashed to the floor, doubling up in agony, then lay still.

Miriam watched this, shocked. Seeing the woman unconscious, she hoped against hope that this was all that would happen although inwardly she knew this was not the end of the matter. Her sigh of anticipation was cut off when she saw the technician remove a device from his belt. Then he injected the woman with a drug, making her regain consciousness abruptly.

The woman immediately began to cry, at first like a baby, then in an uncontrollable throaty bawl. The armed technician kicked her with a heavy boot and shouted, "get UP you fat BITCH!"

Instead, she cowered and screamed, huge tears streaming down her puffy face and gleaming against the dark bruise on one side.

The technician looked down at her, obviously disgusted, and suddenly struck her with the glowing rod. The blow left a gross, burning welt on her white skin. She screamed shrilly, just once, then abruptly stopped.

"Get up," the man whispered through clenched teeth.

The woman, whose small eyes were screwed up in stark terror, quivered and shook with fear as she desperately struggled to her feet. Finally, she stood, swaying slightly and still quivering. Her right ear bled while liberal discolorations slowly appeared on her injured stomach and hips. Then she whined, almost hysterically, "I'm not a spy! I'm not a spy! Please don't hurt me. I've done nothing wrong!" Her voice rose to a screech with this last statement.

Miriam watched, appalled. She simply couldn't believe her eyes, and felt sick as she watched the woman whine and beg. Wondering what she would do in such a situation and she became acutely aware of a deep pity for her.

The electronic whip struck the woman across her breasts. She shrieked with pain, her stubby little hands outstretched in a vain attempt to protect herself. Miriam inwardly screamed with her, watching helplessly as the technician sadistically struck her again and again. No more questions were asked.

He struck her until she lay unconscious on the polished floor. Then the two technicians turned and left the room.

Miriam sat shaken and stunned for about half an hour. She stared dully at the screen, focused on the prostrate woman, but allowed her mind to look inward while the time passed.

The warder technicians returned. Using another injection, they revived the prisoner, spat out several questions which she didn't answer, then once again beat her senseless. This process continued for six hours, six long hours in which the woman either begged and cried incessantly or lay unconscious. Miriam watched dully, with tears coursing down her face.

After six hours, a new warder entered the small room. He revived the woman with another injection, then callously ordered her to her feet.

Miriam couldn't understand how the seriously wounded woman could struggle to her feet, but somehow she did. She was no longer recognizable as the same person who'd entered the room more than six hours earlier, for the red welts covering her body had caused the skin to shred in many places, including on her once sweet-looking face.

The warder faced her squarely and said, "We know you're a member of the damnable sisterhood. Now, why don't you tell me about it and we won't have to hurt you any more." Then he slyly added, "We don't like to hurt you, you know. Just tell us what we want to know."

The woman, her voice barely audible, whimpered, "I swear I'm not a spy. I haven't done anything! Please don't."

"Shut up with that damn drivel!" barked the warder. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No! No, no, no!" she whined. "Don't hurt me!"

The warder had a sly smile on his rugged face. He pointed to the circular indentation in the middle of the floor, and said, "do you see that spot there?"

The prisoner looked frantically, saying, "Yes! Yes, I do."

The warder motioned her over to the small circle, which was slightly sunken into the cold metal floor and measured about one third of a meter in diameter.

"You'll stand inside of this circle until you decide to co-operate with us."

He walked casually over to the now open door, and continued. "Incidentally, the entire floor, excepting that circle, will heat up to 900 degrees after this door closes. I suggest that you don't step out of the circle, or you'll be roasted like the fat pig you are." He chuckled coldly at his little joke, then, continued again. "You may scream all you like in here, but no one will bother to help you. However, if you confess your errant ways with the sisterhood, I'll see that you aren't hurt any more."

He paused for a few moments, and Miriam held her breath, all the while loathing the Argonite beast. She wished the poor imprisoned woman would tell them what they wanted to know, to do anything . . . just so this horror would end. But the woman simply quivered with tears running down her face.

The warder spat, "if you don't tell us what we want to know, you will be fried like bacon!" With this he strode out of the room and the door closed automatically behind him.

At first, nothing happened. Then, after only moments, Miriam saw the woman scuttle into the circle, and realized that the floor must indeed be heating up. Then she saw currents of waving air near the floor. The circle was large enough for the woman to stand in, but too small to sit or even kneel in. The woman stood there, teetering a little, and Miriam saw the play of emotions across the disfigured face: fear, loathing, sadness, panic.

Miriam looked on as the poor woman, now exhausted beyond reason, struggled to stay on her feet. She swayed and quivered, barely able to keep her balance in the little circle. Sweat poured off the rolls of fat, stinging her wounded flesh.

Miriam watched, almost fascinated as the coin-sized drops of sweat plopped onto the hot floor with a hiss! The hisses and splatters of the droplets upon the burning hot floor seemed to echo loudly throughout the small chamber.

She bravely fought back her tears, trying desperately to obey Ruby's instructions. She watched the horrible scene, hating it, but some strong compulsion forcing her to continue.

The floor finally reached five hundred degrees, and the woman gasped for breath in the searing heat. She sobbed and moaned as much in fright as in pain, as she struggled to keep her balance.

The long minutes passed into an hour, then two hours.

Miriam continued watching, almost in a catatonic state as she stared dully straight at the screen without blinking. Dimly she saw the waving effect of the hot air in the room, which had begun at the floor, now reaching the ceiling as well.

By now, the woman had lost all feeling in her feet. She still wept intermittently, but the heat from the floor turned the tears into steam before they left her face. Somehow, though, she seemed resigned to her fate, and stared off into space at interludes until a fresh, weak panic arose in her when she would sob violently. Then she became strangely still and seemed to say something silently to herself.

Miriam saw the woman give a tiny, half-smile, almost as if she had momentarily changed places with Miriam and was comforted. Then she tottered and fell onto the frying pan of the floor, which glowed dull red.

Her body convulsed in tormenting pain. Then, as if by some hidden force, the body rolled several times. The once soft, white skin burned and sizzled, sticking to the scorching metal and tearing off in blackened crisps even after the body stopped rolling.

It didn't matter. The woman was horribly, but thankfully, dying.

All this time, Miriam, with hot blinding tears streaming down her face, rocked slowly back and forth, screaming out, "Oh, God, let her die! Let her DIE!"

After what had seemed an eternity, the poor woman's anguished shrieks subsided into low incoherent moans, and finally into silence.

Miriam fought a strong feeling of nausea welling up in her throat. Her senses reeled and her throat constricted as bile rose, then, subsided.

No longer human in appearance, the blackened corpse still sizzled and smoked on the burning floor. Then the mirror darkened and began to swirl, as Miriam lowered her head into her hands and quivered.

"Now Miriam, what have you learned from this?" Ruby's voice seemed strangely soft, almost caressing. She noticed Miriam's tear-streaked face and nodded to herself.

Miriam sat bolt upright, just as if she had been slapped across the face. Her red-black eyes burned with horror and anger.

"What do you mean what have I learned?" she stammered. "That poor, beautiful woman was just fried to death. What is there to learn?"

Ruby surveyed her coldly, then asked, "do you think that your being emotional is helping our murdered sister in any way?" She slapped her desk with her hand; the sound reverberated throughout the room like a thunder-clap.

Ruby raised her soft voice. "You have just witnessed the interrogation of one of our sisters by the black ones. What you have seen has happened to hundreds of thousands of us in times past, in many, many horrible ways, and will continue to happen to untold numbers in the future! Now, I ask you again. What have you learned from this?"

Miriam sat speechless. Ruby had never spoken to her like this before. Her mind reeled in confusion, and she didn't know what to think. "I do not know," she sobbed.

Ruby, almost glaring, lowered her voice to a hushed, nearly dangerous tone. "Listen to me carefully. What I have to say isn't said lightly, or without compassion. What you've just seen is, in fact, the monstrous reality of this vile place, and of those fair people who inhabit it. They think nothing of what you just witnessed."

Ruby gestured with her hand. "The woman who you watched butchered was our Sister Alsis Jeffnel, a special courier of our Nashramh. She possessed a great deal of extremely sensitive and secret communications data and codes that are vital to our allies. All of this information was stored in her head."

Ruby's voice softened. "What you have seen was a frightened, cowering creature begging for her life as an animal would. That is also what the enemy has seen. After all, it's through their spy cameras that we see everything happening within this evil place. Nevertheless, what you didn't notice is that Sister Alsis did not once admit she was in our sisterhood, much less that she knew what it was. Nor did she give the enemy one shred of the valuable information she carried in her head. Now, think on that, Miriam!"

Miriam thought for a while, then, realized just what Ruby was getting at. The woman - no Sister Alsis Jeffnel - went to her death in the worst possible way rather than disclose her sacred trust. And she did this although she was seized by stark terror and panic. Suddenly Miriam understood completely what she was supposed to see.

"She was terrified of them, yet, because of her sacred trust and discipline, she was stronger than the beasts who murdered her. She was stronger than they knew, than even she knew."

Suddenly Miriam understood what kind of women belonged to this Nashramh Sisterhood. Each had her own human strengths and weaknesses, but because of a strong sense of personal commitment and intense loyalty, each became an important component of their greater sister-hood. She realized that Sister Alsis had selflessly given up her life for the safety of the sisterhood's allies. This showed how important the Nashramh was in the scheme of things.

Miriam now realized there was more to life, and to temporal experience, than just living and learning, as she had done in these apartments for so many years. She saw, for the first time, both the black ones and the Nashramh as a reality, and deep within herself she knew she would some-day, somehow, actively follow the long path toward understanding and pursuing compassionate justice as a way of life.

"Yes", Ruby replied. "You've just realized what you see is seldom what really is. This is one of the hardest lessons you will ever have to learn, but once you have, you will remember it when you deal with anyone you do not know well. What you see visually is usually superficial, and the real truth is always buried deeply out of sight."

On an impulse, Miriam asked, "Where is God when these hideous things happen?"

"Do you know what God is?" asked Ruby.

"I think God is what you taught me. God is the substance and reality of the universe and more - the creator of everything and everyone." Then she added, "I cannot understand why God would allow such things as this to happen."

Smiling to herself, Ruby countered, "As you said, my dear child, God is the creator of everything and everyone. What has that to do with this?"

She didn't see Ruby's point.

Ruby continued. "Miriam, I want you to understand this. What just happened to our sister is not the end of the matter, for there is infinitely more to our Nashramh Sisterhood than you will ever really know."

Miriam looked puzzled.

"We have many secrets that span the experiences of the eons from the very beginning of creation." She leaned back, and said, "now, there'll be no more lessons today. I want you to go to the gymnasium, and to use the remainder of this day to reflect on what's happened and been said."

With this, the mirror began to shimmer again and soon showed only Miriam's own reflection. She stared at it for a brief moment, then went to do what Ruby had instructed.

From that day forward, Miriam could never again shed a tear. Nor did she forget a single, nightmarish moment of her experience with her tortured Sister Alsis Jeffnel.

Calvo Toda, Argonite Technician Grade IV, could never quite understand these despicable women. Why did they choose to die instead of disclosing their association with the degenerate and deceitful Nashramh? Calvo had interrogated more than a thousand suspected agents of Marah's deceit during the past 80 years, but never had one confessed a single word.

All of the women he'd interrogated had died differently, some screaming, and others without uttering a sound. He shook his head to himself. Why they defied Sweet Sargon mystified him, since they obviously had no values. They were Godless, Sargonless infidels. Oh, he knew they'd been seduced by Scoffing Marah, whose cunning questions and exhortations to freedom of thought confused all but the most steadfast of the faithful.

Calvo felt secure in his faith and devotion to Sweet Sargon, and really couldn't understand why these pitiful creatures wouldn't turn to the comfort of Sargon's way. They would never be alone in their faith, and would always belong with the masses of the faithful.

Oh well, he felt no pity for the miserable creatures, since their sufferings were a result of their own choice. After all, nothing prohibited them from giving themselves up to Sweet Sargon's mercy and cleansing their souls of Marah's poison. Sargon would forgive and allow them to join the ranks of his loving servants.

Calvo turned away from the monitoring screen, which focused on the frying corpse of Alsis Jeffnel, and poured a mug of spiced tea. Then he turned his attention to the next name on his interrogation list, humming to himself absentmindedly.

Chapter 5

Crisis

More than 110,000 years ago we planned the ultimate destruction of Samael-Borgdragon Estate even as its unholy foundations were being laid. It all began with an elfin sister laying down in front of a 10,000 ton roller and being crushed into the black metal compound of the northwest wall . . . now another sister was laying down her life to fulfill the final step of this plan. . . .

10:00-28 ARKEM 6682-6N5

One day Ruby appeared, and after greeting Miriam, she said, "I think it's time you learn the different slave clearances and their duties with respect to the lower fortress."

Miriam sat back in her padded chair, happy to hear she wouldn't watch another interrogation today.

Ruby began. "There are seven distinct classes of slave personnel. The first is the highest, or 'Colmer', clearance. They are responsible for all executive and higher administrative functions of the estate.

"The second is the 'Argonite' clearance. These are the scientists and technicians, from the highest to lowest levels. As far as we of the sisterhood can tell, they are extremely advanced in their scientific knowledge. You have seen several examples of lower level Argonite technicians, who act as interrogators.

"The third is the 'Soffonic' clearance. These are military personnel, and all who inhabit this citadel conform to the normal appearance standards. However, there are members of several races which have achieved the rank of Soffonic. Those soldiers

make up parts of the Black Legions, as well as patrols for all of the spaceports dominated by Belial's forces.

"The fourth is the 'Jerden' clearance. These specialized infiltrators make up a large portion of the Black Legions. This clearance has many racial types.

"These first four clearances are the privileged classes of the estate. Indispensable to the black ones, they have proven their loyalty to Sweet Sargon by long service in his Black Legions throughout the millennia. Thus they're treated extremely well, almost as nobility of a sort, and have adequate food, shelter, recreation, and rank. They've also taken on the genteel ways of their master. But! They are, all the same, mere slaves of Sargon."

Ruby paused for a moment, looking at Miriam. The girl seemed to have no questions, so she went on.

"Now the other three slave classes consist of unimportant non-privileged personnel who are useful to the black ones. First, the 'Portrog,' members are skilled laborers, in mining, industry, agriculture and other normative functions. The second class is the 'Mertrog' clearance, made up of menial laborers. They're used for the hard jobs in mining, agriculture, and so on. Both classes of personnel are loyal to Sweet Sargon and are among the 'Faithful', but are natives of an exploited world. For instance the natives of this planet, and of the two where the other black citadels are located, are made up of these two clearances.

"The final class is that of the, 'Trophy', or 'Sub-Breeds'. These are various beings the black ones feel are completely expendable. They're used for experimentation, entertainment, various sports, games, and sacrifices. You, my dear, were a member of this last class."

Ruby went on to discuss many of the detailed functions of each of these clearances, all the while showing Miriam living examples on the mirror screen.

Miriam often thought about her own past, sometimes wondering why she'd been named a trophy and where she'd come from.

Miriam knew that if it hadn't been for her long discussions with Ruby, and her increasingly difficult regimen of physical training, she couldn't have endured the monstrous things she had to watch on the mirror-screen. There were mornings when she so dreaded

whatever new horror it was she had to watch, and her resulting inward turmoil, that she could hardly pull herself out of bed.

Not only did the disgusting and nerve-racking content, of these scenes sicken her, she loathed the fact that while these horrible things happened in the coldly polished rooms of the lower fortress, the people of the beautiful upper city lived in heedless luxury and peace. She understood that these beautiful and genteel people knew about the tortures, but were so distant from it that it meant nothing to them. In fact, they seemed to enjoy violence, especially at the games, showing their true feelings and lack of compassion for those who suffered torture and death.

Even as the years progressed, Miriam couldn't adjust to watching the scenes. Although she watched them only periodically, she knew they occurred many times daily.

Above all, during these years she was haunted by the vivid memory of the fate of Sister Alsis Jeffnel as she begged for her life, all the while hiding her sisterhood secrets.

Many of the lessons Miriam learned at this time were not as dark. She continued learning about the peoples and events of her galaxy, more languages, and many more enriching things.

The special package, an animal freezer container with the words 'Special Handling' inscribed on each side, had arrived.

The Argonite technician attending the Reception Center's 'K' Interrogation Block knew that this plain-looking cryo-package contained the unconscious figure of an old woman, whom he surmised must have some great importance. He mechanically removed the side panel, and as the first order of business, he applied the emblem of Samael-Borgdragon to the frozen creature's right forearm. This completed, he re-closed the package and routed it to the special handling section for processing.

Belenice supervised the un-packaging of the defenseless-looking old woman. His technicians injected 'Hyper-DT' solution into her jugular vein, to make her regain consciousness in about ten minutes. He was curious to see how she would awaken. Perhaps she'd immediately panic, as so many of the prisoners did, or try to take her own life. Or perhaps she'd just clam up and watch him with those calm, deep eyes which many women of that damnable sisterhood had.

It would certainly be interesting to find out; after all, each detainee reacted differently. His instructions said this was a high-

ranking flag officer from the enemy's secret sisterhood, and considered extremely dangerous. Sen-Moran Sheven, the estate's chief scientist, had personally given Belenice specific instructions to welcome this particular detainee in such a manner as to both damage her physically and to provoke a fighting response.

Belenice responded, "With pleasure, my lord," pleased at the opportunity to serve his Sweet Sargon. Personally, he was curious to see just how dangerous one of these sisters really was. Unfortunately, in his past experience, those who'd been suspected of belonging to the vile sisterhood proved to be a disappointment. None ever fought back, but instead screamed, begged, and groveled in a disgusting manner, or simply clammed up. Hopefully this one would be different. Belenice wanted at least one opportunity to gain new or important information to present to his Lord, Sweet Sargon.

Sister-Magum Claren Demorah regained consciousness slowly, with a nagging sense of imminent doom hanging over her. Then her head cleared rapidly, and she became aware that her senses had been acutely tuned before her body responded to the drug injection she knew was meant to awaken her.

Even though her eyes were still closed and her body numb, she could hear an almost complete silence. She sensed the room she was in was small. She realized immediately that her body was crumpled in a heap on the cold metal floor.

Finally, she felt the presence of two persons in the room with her, and the sight of one black-uniformed Argonite interrogator out of the corner of her partially open left eye confirmed her senses. She suspected the other was just. . . .

Claren was roughly jerked to her feet by her hair.

Her feet felt unsteady from the effects of the injection, but she managed to remain standing. She turned her head a little and saw that the first man brandished an neuronc whip. The presence behind her, who most assuredly was another Argonite interrogator, again grabbed her grey-green hair and smashed her against a smooth, steel wall. The sudden shock of the impact and blinding pain startled her body awake, and she staggered away from the wall, momentarily disorientated.

"Stand at attention, bitch," commanded a chillingly cold voice. "Who do you think you are to move without permission?"

A resounding slap caught her across the face, jarring her numb nerves and again causing her to sway in dizziness.

The two beefy interrogators walked around the naked woman and taunted her with slurs and curses. From time to time each would kick the old woman to get her attention, but she didn't satisfy them with a response. Instead, she stood at attention and adjusted her muscles in carefully regulated patterns to induce a better flow of blood and adrenalin through her cold body. This enhanced her calmness.

Claren kept her attention on the two beasts, who obviously thought they had their prey cornered and were preparing for the kill. She realized they were trying to get a fighting response with their taunts: "What's your name, cur? Speak up, filth!"

Claren struggled to remain calm, knowing she'd die here, a prisoner in this vile place.

She absorbed the blows and kicks without any kind of overt response, and even allowed herself the satisfaction of knowing she would give them nothing to analyze.

After an hour, the Argonite interrogators still had no response. One stopped pacing around her, narrowing his shrewd eyes. He ordered her to stand at rest, with her hands clasped in back and her legs spread at shoulder's width.

Then the shorter of the Argonite technicians took a position directly in front of her, and said softly and mockingly, "we don't like to do this kind of thing, you know."

Claren knew they would follow their orders, whatever they were.

Having received no response from her the technician spat, "well now, deceitful slut, we'll see if we can make you bat an eyelid, eh?" With this, he struck her vulnerable genital area with the fully activated neuronc whip.

A surge of white-hot pain burned through Claren and took the breath from her lungs as she involuntarily crumpled to the floor. The two interrogators aimed kicks at her wounded genitals, so she immediately curled up into a ball and silently endured the pain. Consciousness left her, and all faded to a dull red, then black.

"Good morning, Miriam," said Ruby. "Did you sleep well?"

"Good morning, Ruby. Yes, I did," answered Miriam as she sipped her tangy spiced tea.

"There's an interrogation about to take place that I want you to watch. Actually, it's something other than a standard interrogation, but still extremely important."

"Oh," said Miriam. She hadn't seen an interrogation for some time, and she hoped they were over. "Is it one of our sisters?"

"Yes, Sister-Magum Claren Demorah. She's a high-ranking flag officer of our Nashramh rim fleet, and was captured while stranded on a primitive planet in this sector. Watch carefully."

Miriam sighed, and watched as the mirror began to swirl. Shortly it cleared into a scene depicting a large brightly lit laboratory.

Claren awoke slowly, with piercingly bright lights shining in her dry eyes. Her senses were immediately alert, and she felt her body to be strapped securely to a smooth and apparently long table. Through the insistent throbbing between her legs she sensed minute imprints of numerous probes penetrating her flesh. She mused dimly to herself that she felt as if she were in a sanitized hospital room, awaiting surgery by student doctors.

She immediately realized that her ordeal with the Argonite beasts was a friendly welcoming and softening up prior to the next stage of interrogation.

Claren relaxed her tense and knotted-up body and fought to calm her breathing. She was terrified, and with good reason; absolutely no one had ever survived to tell of the black ones' interrogation techniques, although she had a fair idea of what some might be. She knew that before they were even partly finished, she'd welcome death. Death would come far too late to blot out the memories of an excruciatingly tortured body.

Although Claren was terrified, almost beyond reason, she was determined not to give in to the black beasts. Thus, she soothed her cluttered mind by taking notice of her surroundings, and by mentally closing all doors to her knowledge. It took her some minutes to calm her racing fear, for although she was old, and had lived a full life, she was afraid to die here, even though she had come a long way to do just that. She didn't fear death, since she remembered dying countless times before. No, she feared what the black ones would do afterwards. She knew the realms of death far better than most mortals, and understood what these creatures could do to her soul.

Flourtiamat, accompanied by her chief scientist, Moran Sheven, entered the brightly lit examination room. She definitely looked forward to this interrogation.

She strolled elegantly over to the gleaming operating table, on which the patient was firmly strapped. Musing inwardly at the helplessness of this 'formidable' Sister Claren, she wrinkled her nose at the sagging skin on the old woman's body.

Flourtiamat appraised the woman for a moment, then, checked the equipment. Each of the five interrogation units were wired to the patient. Around her head, which had been shaved before transfer here, was fitted the cap of the High-Gain Psycho Recovery Unit, which would reactivate the patient if she died. Then she personally calibrated and checked each micro-electrode, after remarking to Moran, "your staff did their jobs well. The tissue should serve well to calibrate our instruments on." Yes, each electrode had a firm grip on the individual nerve endings of the injured tissue.

Finally, she tested the intravenous tubes, noting the tissue responses.

After the completion of the electro-chemical tests on the patient's nervous system and tissue support organs, Flourtiamat proceeded to the heart of her experimental interrogator complex, the Variable Frequency Psycho Shearing Generator. This was the crowning achievement of her career, since it solved the basic problem encountered by previous designs. It could segregate brain wave amplitude levels and translate them into hardcopy data. In short, it could do what was previously impossible: tap the very memories and awareness of the incorporeal soul by scanning its reflective track on the living tissue of the brain.

During these tests, which sent searing pain through her nervous system, Claren observed her interrogator. She was beautiful in a chilling sort of way, with gold-spun hair and large blue eyes. But in these cold eyes Claren could see no compassion, only the objective interest of a scientist.

Claren knew this was Flourtiamat, the 'Lady of Samael-Borgdragon Estate', and second only to Gensargon, the Belial who ruled this place. During her lord's long absence she was in sole control of the estate, and under her everything was operated as smoothly as if the lord himself was here. Nothing escaped her

attention, not even the fact that Sister Claren had been stranded on one of the primitive worlds under her lord's domination.

Flourtiamat never forgot the missing trophy lost by the keeper of the children's playground 94 years earlier. She would inform her lord, Gensargon, of this when he returned, for it was Sargon's decision, and his only, what to do about such cases.

Flourtiamat expertly inserted the 15 generator probes into the patient's skull, which had been drilled after being shaved. Deftly, she adjusted their depths into the respective brain convolutions and sealed each to prevent unnecessary loss of vital fluids.

After completing each of these functions, she calibrated them by activating the electron probes attached to the nerve endings of the damaged tissue. She then attached the cross links between the motor section and the memory lobes. From the slight stiffening of the old woman, she knew that everything worked with precision.

Now Flourtiamat paused to study the patient more carefully, whom she had been informed was extremely dangerous.

The old woman was awake, and she seemed strangely calm for an undrugged patient. This was dangerous in itself, for it meant that she had exceptional self-discipline.

Claren's eyes were open, and they were a clear, vibrant green. They watched Flourtiamat with a calm curiosity.

Her breathing was even and controlled, which Tiamat took to be a further sign of rigid self-discipline. She noted also that the old woman's body was small-framed and in excellent condition for its age, which Flourtiamat understood to be more than 650 years.

She looked carefully into the patient's clear eyes, and spoke with the soft, even, and chillingly cold voice of a scientist addressing a specimen.

"So. You are the face of our enemy. Now we shall see just what you are made of." She smiled slightly, an introspective smile, and continued. "You will not escape us, old woman. Nor will you deceive us. You are our property now, to do with as we will."

Claren saw the face of her tormentor clearly, and appraised icy blue eyes devoid of warmth or emotion. Recording them indelibly into the deepest recesses of her mind, she mused it was a pity such beauty covered such emptiness.

She didn't see any reason to respond, so simply watched and listened. She felt terrible streaks of pain in her genitals, and recognized this generated from the calibration device. She

concentrated all of her bodily control and self-discipline to dull it, for she needed, now more than ever before, to think clearly. What bothered her most were the devices attached, or rather inserted, into her head. Somehow it seemed obscene for them to cut off all of her lovely hair and press instruments into her head. But then, the black ones were known for removing all vestiges of dignity from their prisoners. All she could do was wait silently.

Miriam watched the testing on her mirror screen, not knowing what Tiamat was going to do to Sister Claren. She sensed that the old woman was in great pain, but masking it. She wondered what all of those instruments were for, but when she called "Ruby", her teacher didn't answer. There was nothing to do but watch the screen.

Flourtiamat activated the interrogator complex and slowly adjusted each of its probes. The process, although complicated, would be complete in just under half an hour. She knew that by the end of the cycle, the mind would completely shatter from the unnatural stress, and the purpose of the Psycho Recovery Unit was to capture the soul and to store it with others in the central computer's multi-phase storage banks. At a later time her lord, Gensargon, would enjoy manipulating them and examining their childish reactions.

Silently, rhythmically, each nerve-ending in Claren's body was subjected to jolting, piercing pain while the probes in her brain flashed subsonic waves mixed with ultraviolet light waves through the corresponding brain cells and then into the frontal lobes. Claren felt the over-whelming pain briefly, but her mind soon lost all sense of decorum, and she sensed things that had no descriptive reality. In a jumble of mental experiences that only remotely resembled the strongest of hallucinations, she fell into an abyss of darkness.

Miriam watched with dawning horror as Claren was subjected to this strange form of torture. She saw nothing but an abrupt jolt of the old woman's body, although she caught enough of the conversation between Tiamat and Moran to understand the basics of what was happening. She wondered exactly what Claren was going through, for it was almost worse to see and hear nothing, when she knew the poor woman was being tortured in the worst way possible. Her clear, precious mind was now being systematically destroyed.

Presently the interrogator complex finished its cycle, and Flourtiamat removed the crystal memory disc with its 20,000,000,000 bits of information. Then she stared at the machine in wide-eyed wonder, which bordered on disbelief.

The complex indicated that the woman's mind and soul were still intact within the brain!

Flourtiamat rechecked the machinery, and found nothing wrong with it. She looked at the old woman, marveling at the strength of her mind. She then turned and reactivated the complex for another cycle.

Miriam didn't understand exactly what happened, but she knew Tiamat was displeased with the results. She watched throughout the next cycle, her stomach churning.

At the end of the second cycle, 20,000,000,000 additional bits of information were recorded on another crystal disc, but once again the complex indicated the mind and soul were still intact.

Flourtiamat was fascinated; she wanted to know just what was causing this phenomenon. She continued repeating the cycle, and after eight more times, the instrument indicated the mind and soul had been effectively shattered. The woman's body was still alive, but nothing occupied it.

When the operations were obviously over, Miriam sat still, stunned. The entire procedure disgusted her, for the person being interrogated had died like a specimen in a test tube. At least in the situation with Alsis, one could retain some degree of her humanity, but in this case the woman had been worked over . . . dissected and probed as if she were already dead.

Miriam's entrails churned as they had after Sister Alsis' death although this time she didn't really understand what had taken place. But deep within her self, she feared, and yes, knew the black ones had gained an important victory with this interrogation. Yet, they'd asked no questions.

While technicians removed the machinery from the inert body, Flourtiamat reviewed the astronomical amount of data gleaned from this old woman of the sisterhood. It was well beyond her experience to encounter such a powerful mind, perhaps a mind nearly as advanced as her lord's. She mused to herself that this galaxy might be a bit harder to take than her lords anticipated, especially if there were more minds like this one to oppose them.

The data filled ten crystal discs with 200,000,000,000 bits of information in all. This was more than nine times the amount of what she had extracted from the most advanced mind she had ever dealt with!

Her decision was immediate and binding. "Moran, these data and everything dealing with them are ultra-secret," she said in a low, cold voice. "It's not to be discussed or mentioned under any circumstance, with the penalty of everlasting damnation by Samael himself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Liege Lady," croaked a terrified Moran. A threat from Tiamat was tantamount to a death sentence. She was not to be trifled with, for she was the only person in Gensargon's confidence.

She continued. "I will personally place this in our lord Gensargon's private vault. Dispose of this carcass and classify the ID number as TOP-SECRET and enter it into the quarantine account."

"Yes, my Liege Lady. It will be done immediately!"

Moran personally began to disconnect the more delicate probes without further comment. This was serious work, and he wanted to take no chances.

Flourtiamat placed the memory discs in a satchel, and holding it, left the interrogation room. She proceeded directly to Gensargon's private quarters and deposited the precious crystals into his personal vault. She didn't attempt to review their contents or in any way let their existence be known. They were for her lord's eyes alone.

After placing the crystals in Gensargon's vault, she paused outside for a moment. She immediately decided to alert her lord of the priority discovery by their secret transmission, and in an unbreakable code known only to him. She knew she would remain his favorite for centuries to come, for what she had presented him with could be the key to the entire defense of this galaxy, and perhaps even more.

Flourtiamat smiled to herself, and experienced, for a brief moment, an emotion forbidden to her kind - self-satisfaction. Now Gensargon would be coming back in two years time. This she knew.

After the Argonite technicians removed Sister-Magum Claren Demorah's body, the scene in the mirror faded and Ruby appeared. She didn't ask Miriam any questions about the interrogation, and

Miriam herself had none to ask. The lessons that day were cut short, and throughout them, Ruby seemed preoccupied.

After that, Miriam's lessons took an abrupt change. She no longer viewed the goings on of the castle, but instead learned about the area outside of the estate. Ruby had told her Gensargon would be returning to the citadel in two years, and that Sister Claren's death had definitely not been in vain. Ruby rigorously taught her the geography and terrain outside of the estate, and the details of the only other port on this world, the Gilbrand Spaceport.

The spaceport was located 180 kilometers to the north of the fortress, and 50 kilometers inland, high in the craggy mountains of Sargontrek Range. Miriam rehearsed from memory every aspect of the ten alternate routes to the spaceport, such as the foliage, terrain, population distribution of animals and men, ambush points, and the new structures on each of the paths.

Miriam also learned of the only secret entrance to the spaceport; it was near the top of a cliff, and had once been a drainpipe for emptying sewage over a 600 meter-high cliff. It was no longer in use.

Miriam learned she could reach this cliff by any of ten routes. Once there, she would scale it, straight up, using climbing harnesses.

Finally, Miriam memorized the special ways to board and stow away on the Palean space freighter she was being prepared to escape on. This part of her training, which centered on the freighter and a 250 kilometer-long Starliner, astounded her. She would be expected to board them both unnoticed and cross the Starliner to hidden quarters near the binary exchange reactors.

Chapter 6

Leaving

Our trap closed without Tiamat noticing, while arrangements for Miriam's departure were being put into effect. Leaving the hell of Borgdragon Estate was by no means an escape from its grasp for any of us. No, neither Miriam nor any of our sisters who shared that incarnate horror could avoid its becoming a part of them . . . they and we have, in a way, become unwilling spawn of Samael who know his incarnate body while rejecting his soul. . . .

14:10-06 MAGUM 6705-6N5

After an hour's strenuous workout in the gymnasium, Miriam paused to rest. She'd been practicing several defense tactics, as well as offensive ones, and had worked up a good sweat.

With a sigh, she plopped down at her desk with a cool drink. She then pulled one of her practice keyboards close to practice the various numerical codes Ruby had taught her. Unexpectedly, the mirror began to swirl, signaling Ruby's arrival.

"Have we given up already?" Ruby inquired, smiling.

"No. I am taking a break," Miriam replied. "Besides, I had not planned to work out for more than an hour at a time."

"Well now, dear girl, that's going to change. Starting tomorrow," said Ruby, laughing. "Now things are really going to get tough. After all, we have to build up your endurance."

"Oh," said Miriam, wondering what she would need endurance for.

"You'll depart this place in 15 days. Because of certain conditions on your travels, you'll also wear a cloaking uniform and atmospheric gas rectifier while you exercise.

"For the next four days, you'll have five-hour exercise sessions. The four days after will be seven-hour sessions, and the last six days with 10 hour sessions. The final day will be the real thing. You'll leave this black fortress and begin your journey."

Miriam sat still, countless thoughts whirling through her mind. One thought overruled the others: she was going OUTSIDE!

Since Ruby had begun teaching her the geography of this world, Miriam had known the day of her departure would come sooner or later. Now the day had been revealed to her, stabbing her with fear. She would be leaving the only sanctuary she could remember. Now her departure was becoming a reality.

Miriam felt queasy with sudden shock. She wanted to lie down on her comfortable bed and pretend this was all just a bad dream.

Ruby sensed Miriam's unspoken fears, and her voice softened. "Miriam, your lessons thus far have prepared you well for the journey. You know the ambush points and traps on each of the alternative routes. However, during the next 14 days, I will personally introduce you to a variety of poisons, assassination techniques, and subtle weapons used by both our sisterhood and the black ones. You may have to use one means or another to kill your enemies on this world or on one of the spaceships. The various means for murder are so numerous that they prohibit any realistic form of self-defense on your part. Therefore you must ignore them completely and consequently formulate your attack plan to bypass as many encounters with unknown variables as possible."

Miriam listened carefully, steadying her reeling mind.

"Remember, Miriam, you must rely upon yourself alone and follow all of my instructions to the letter, or you will not succeed. This journey is the most important mission you'll encounter for thousands of years to come."

"But Ruby, why have I been chosen for this mission? What is the mission?"

Ruby leaned back. "You'll learn those details at a later time, but I will tell this much . . . you'll be a Nashramh courier."

With this, Ruby looked Miriam in the eyes and continued. "I know you're very frightened, and don't understand all of this. But

if nothing else can spur you on to succeed and to keep you alive, remember what they do to people in this vile place. Especially to people found trespassing. Remember what you escaped from."

She paused for a reflective moment, then, went on. "You should also know that the very existence of Borgdragon is about to end. You, dear Miriam, will be the instrument of its destruction."

Miriam sat upright, stammering, "How?"

"Very easily," Ruby smiled. "When you close the outer hatch behind you, you will twist the key you brought here in its slot, thus breaking it. That will begin an irreversible chain reaction which will rip this entire vile complex out of temporal existence. It will be no more!"

Key? What key? Miriam didn't remember having come here or bringing anything with her those many years ago.

Suddenly, Miriam felt small, insignificant, and afraid.

"What about you, Ruby? I cannot do that to you!" she blurted, already knowing the answer.

"Miriam, you must do what is necessary. This vile place must be destroyed before the beasts inhabiting it can do much more harm. Fighting the black ones, is much more important than saving one, or even a few lives. That's how the black ones manipulate decent people . . . by holding innocent lives hostage.

"Besides, my time here is no longer of value, my child. More important things are taking place elsewhere."

Miriam didn't understand this last statement, but Ruby was already continuing. "What you do now, as my courier, will affect billions of people throughout this galaxy for a million years to come. Remember, I trust you, Miriam."

Ruby then instructed Miriam to open the third door on the wall opposite the mirror. For the first time in 95 years, Miriam felt more than an idle curiosity about what lay behind the locked door. All of those years, long ago, after she'd found it was locked, she'd almost forgotten about it.

The door opened easily, revealing a dark room. As she passed through the entrance, hidden lights flickered on. She saw a narrow bed and a chest of drawers. There was nothing else.

Miriam went to the drawers and opened the bottom one per Ruby's instructions. She found a pair of boots, a cloaking uniform, a pair of gloves, and an atmosphere rectifier head mask stacked neatly within. The grey material was similar to that of the cape she

had worn so many years ago, although she couldn't remember this. It shimmered and blended with the drawer and her grey hands.

Miriam examined the items carefully. Excepting the boots, each article consisted of soft, thick, and seamless spongy material. The boots were thinner, but of very tough material, and had low, spongy soles on them.

She gathered the set, and after closing the drawer and the room's door, returned to her bedroom with them. Sitting on her bed, she decided to try the uniform on.

Miriam easily pulled her own light blue coverall-robe over her head and kicked off her sandals. After folding her robe and placing it on the bed, she set about pulling on the cloaking uniform. She stepped through the neck, which was the only opening besides the hands. Finally, after tugging and pulling at it, she had the uniform on.

Only her head and hands were visible. The uniform fit firmly, but not too tightly, and the pliable material moved with her like a second skin.

Miriam sat down again, pulling on the boots, which fastened automatically once her feet were inside. They felt comfortable, and she walked around her room in them before returning to the bed. Then she donned the headgear and gloves, both automatically sealing themselves into the material of the neck and wrists of the uniform.

Miriam felt strange. She had a little trouble breathing, because the uniform made her feel restricted, although it fit perfectly. She felt as though her skin couldn't breathe, though after a short time the novelty wore off and she felt almost normal.

Wondering what she looked like, she left the bedroom and went to the large mirror. She walked back and forth in front of it for a few moments, then, looked intently at her reflection.

She gasped! Miriam could hardly see herself in the mirror. All she really saw were slight distortions in the mirror as she passed in front of it. She wasn't invisible, but blended so well with her surroundings she literally faded into the walls.

Fascinated, she looked carefully at her reflection. Nothing of her self was exposed to the air, and she had to move very close up to the mirror to get a definite image of herself at all.

Miriam knew the suit was airtight. The atmosphere rectifier's facemask had a special filter which drew in only necessary breathing gases while removing expended gases. A special lens fit over the eyes, greatly magnifying them so she looked like a scrawny insect. Otherwise, her body was barely visible.

She inspected herself in the mirror for a few minutes, assured that no predators would see her. As she turned to go into her bedroom to remove the suit, she paused with an inspiration. She would start her exercises a day earlier, with two exercise sessions of two hours each, so that she would be prepared for tomorrow.

Miriam had entered the fourth day of her 10-hour drill sessions, though somewhat used to the cloaking uniform and the thick gloves, she occasionally wished to take them off. Part of her daily regimen required that she manipulate tools to remove and refasten bolts and screws. In these lessons, and many others, Ruby provided her with holographic images of the situations to work with.

The first days of her advanced training tired Miriam considerably. She forced herself to finish the allotted time period for exercising, often feeling so tired she nearly gave in to fatigue. By the time she adjusted herself to the five-hour sessions, Ruby had switched them to seven hours. Now at 10 hours a day, Miriam was slowly becoming accustomed to the new demands on her body.

During the other hours of her busy days, Miriam spent long sessions with Ruby at her desk. On her keyboard, she memorized and practiced punching out long sequences of numbers and letters, without knowing the purpose. Ruby indicated that when Miriam saw similar types of keyboards, she would punch out the appropriate codes.

In addition, Ruby briefed and drilled her increasingly on the routes to the spaceport, the steps to enter it, and the procedures to safely stow away on the Palean space freighter destined for the Starliner. She also prepared Miriam to secretly board the massive Starliner and find the sisterhood's special hidden quarters.

The rigid timetable and Ruby's expectations drove Miriam to frustration. On the 12th day of her intensive training she nearly broke down.

In desperation she wailed to Ruby, "I am afraid I cannot make it, Ruby! Even if I do get as far as the spaceport, I do not think I can remember all the things I need to know!"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," responded the older woman, smiling to herself.

"But Ruby, of all the information I have studied since I first came here, I can remember but little, much less all of these new things!" Miriam was in a panic, and she wondered why Ruby hadn't started the lessons earlier.

Ruby laughed, the first really amused laugh Miriam ever heard from her. Then, smiling broadly, she said, "my dear, dear child. What makes you think you're different from me, or anyone else, for that matter? Of course you can't remember everything. Nobody, but nobody, has instant recall of all things at once. We have to think things out for each new situation, and draw from our experiences and knowledge. If you're familiar with all I've given you, and I know you are, you'll remember the right things when the time arrives. Don't worry, little one. You'll do what's necessary when the time comes."

After Ruby left, Miriam sat at her desk and sipped cool water, as she swallowed an energy tablet. During her training she had also been forced onto a new diet of water and energy tablets. According to Ruby, her entire gastro-urinary system had to be purged before she left for her mission. She couldn't remove as much as a glove outside these rooms, much less eat or relieve herself, for the predators she might encounter had as keen a sense of smell as they did sight. Fortunately her airtight cloaking uniform rendered her neutral with respect to sight, smell, and even heat. Ruby warned her that her gray skin had an extremely pungent odor easily picked up by both the predators and the sensors at the spaceport and on the escape ships. Since the spaceport and vessels scanned for unpredictable heat sources, the uniform also neutralized this.

On the morning of Miriam's 15th day, Ruby instructed her to enter the special 'fourth' room and lay down on the bed. Completely outfitted in the cloaking uniform, and boots, she felt uncomfortable. As she lay expectantly on the bed, she mulled over her conversation with Ruby, 10 minutes earlier.

"We're counting on you," Ruby had said, looking intently into Miriam's eyes. "I want you to know we love you very much, and that you'll never be alone again. You are one with us!"

With that, the screen faded and left Miriam sitting alone in front of the blue, shimmering mirror. She had never felt this alone before, and fear sat like a lump in the pit of her stomach.

Then she donned her entire cloaking uniform as Ruby instructed and came to lay upon this bed.

Miriam awakened with a start. The room was lit only by a small lamp above the chest of drawers. Feeling disoriented, she focused her attention on this lamp. She didn't know how long she'd slept, much less even going to sleep.

She slowly sat up, an odd sensation engulfing her body. She couldn't identify the feeling, but it was definitely odd.

Miriam swung her feet off the bed and onto the floor, the movement seemed strangely slow. She rose, and moved listlessly over to the drawers. Opening the middle drawer, she found and removed a wide gray belt with a tool packet on it. Attached to the belt was a harness which she connected to fasteners on her boots. She wrapped the remaining lengths with their anchors around her shoulder and neck.

Then she opened the top drawer, finding a small fiber laser much like the one Ruby trained her with. She inserted it into a hidden pocket in her uniform, hoping fervently that she wouldn't be forced to kill anyone.

The three remaining objects within the drawer were a key on a long grey neck chain, a grey flashlight with a belt clip, and a special device for descending the fortress wall. She put the necklace on and attached the reel assembly to her belt, but held onto the flashlight.

Miriam then turned and slowly walked into the living room, while behind her, the dim lamp blinked off for the last time.

The living room was completely dark, and Miriam knew she was completely alone here, more alone than when she'd first arrived. She played her flashlight around the large room, and her heart leaped when she saw that the mirror was no longer there.

Instead, the walls were an unreflecting black, just as she knew the walls of the fortress to be. Nothing remained of the sunny yellow colors which had decorated the room. Where the mirror had been a large black rectangle remained which seemed to be part of the wall.

Icy fear and unease gripped Miriam as she realized the sudden impact of her total and complete isolation.

Miriam forced herself to continue looking around the empty and now derelict room. All of the doors were open, the darkness yawning behind them, beckoning her. Ignoring them, she forced herself to turn and pass through the door she knew led outside.

She walked quickly up the dark passageway, wondering to herself just how Ruby had built this place and where everything had gone. She felt frightened and disoriented now that nothing remained here but herself, and suddenly, she wanted desperately to be outside, to be with people.

As she walked, she wondered if Ruby had withdrawn into the mammoth electro-organic computer complex, and if she would ever be free of this vile place.

Then, because she no longer had any reason to stay, even though she was frightened, she increased her pace and walked briskly up the long tunnel.

After a short while, she arrived at the wall chamber which seemed as desolate as her home had become. Both doors were open, so she went in one and out the other, quickly reaching the exterior hatch.

Miriam lay down on the hatch, attaching her flashlight to her belt after shutting it off. She pressed the red release button, and the hatch slowly swung open, with her on it. When it stopped, she un-slung the straps from around her neck and attached each of the three anchors to the overhanging wall. Then she quickly swung out, suspended securely by the anchors.

Miriam didn't look down, but immediately removed the key from around her neck and inserted it into a barely visible slot. The hatch slowly closed and locked itself.

She twisted the key, which broke easily in the slot. Then she sensed, rather than felt, a low, ominous rumble as something happened . . . she didn't know what it was, but she knew it was momentous. Then the frightening feeling disappeared.

The giant sun sank low on the horizon, shining with a dull, blood-red glow. Miriam, still hanging under the jutting overhang by the three anchors, utilized them to work her way towards the vertical part of the wall. When she hung about half a meter from the wall, she paused to pull a fourth anchor plate from the reel assembly attached to her belt. She reached up and attached it to the overhang above her head.

When she knew it was fastened she removed the other three anchors and slung them over her shoulder and around her neck. She swung suspended only by the thin cable, swaying in the slight wind, and felt a little queasy. Then, not looking down, she pressed a button on the reel assembly attached to her belt, and slowly, but steadily, she descended on the thin, but very strong cable.

On and on she descended down the face of the wall as the reel released slow meters of the cable. Finally, she braked to a slow stop.

Miriam probed the vertical wall with her anchors, found the hidden attraction areas, and attached them. She was at the same level she'd been when she started climbing upward as a weak, shivering, nearly dead creature.

With the anchors secured, Miriam released the reel assembly from her belt and pressed a red button on the bottom of it. Then, leaving it hanging there, she began moving to her left, towards the far-off cliff.

After a few moments, there was a faint sizzle as the reel package, cable, and anchor disintegrated into a fine powder, which dissolved and blew away with the cool sea breeze, unnoticed by anyone or anything.

Miriam moved quickly and easily toward the cliff. When she reached it, she proceeded along the cliff's face throughout the night, stopping only for short periods. By morning light she had traveled 11 kilometers, her muscles aching with fatigue. The work in itself wasn't too hard, for she was well-supported by the straps attached to her belt and boots, but the distance was considerable, and she was tired. Panting with exhaustion, she paused for a few moments.

She now had to make a choice. Of the ten alternate routes, she could either, scale the cliff and take any of several routes, or she could descend and take the more dangerous, but faster beach route. She had already decided on the beach route, but during her pause she once again examined her reasons.

The beach route was the fastest. After all, since she was shorter by far than the standard for a courier, she would naturally take longer than others to reach her destination, even on the shortest route. But the beach route was desirable for other reasons as well.

First, although it held more ambush and trap areas that predators were apt to use, it was also close to the Borgdragon wall.

And because of this, it was regularly sanitized, thus killing any living beings on it. This, Miriam felt, would after a time discourage the predators from the beach.

Her second reason was more important. Her cloaking uniform would easily blend with the dark brown stone of the cliff and beach without having to frequently assimilate color as it must around rocks, plants, and landmarks on the other routes. Thus she would escape unwanted attention. In addition, the sea beating against the dark stone would cover up any sound from her light tread.

Finding her judgment sound, Miriam descended to the rocky shore quickly, then began traveling north as briskly as she could. She sensed the coolness of the sea breeze, displeased she couldn't really feel it because of her uniform. Her first time outside, and she felt as though she were still locked inside!

She did enjoy the terrain as much as she had the time to. But time was of the essence, so she forced herself on without exploring as she would have liked. As she traveled onward, she saw signs of predators, but saw none. At times she felt hidden eyes around her, but the uniform protected her. The little figure strode on, blending so well with the dark stone nothing could have seen it.

When Miriam had traveled 62 kilometers along the beach, she stopped for a short pause, checked her surroundings, turned on an oblique angle away from the shore and continued her trek. This inland route took her directly to the industrial spaceport, and she had decided on it during her training. She reasoned once again that it was the shortest route. The longer she was exposed to unfriendly terrain, the better the opportunity to have an unfriendly encounter. Also because of her smallness, the fastest route would take her long enough no matter how quickly she covered ground.

Miriam hiked quickly on, occasionally swallowing an energy tablet next to her mouth in a flat pouch in her face gear. She sparingly sipped water as she went on, trying to conserve it.

The terrain she now covered was rough, but fairly even, and spotted with dry, sparse brush and grass. As she went inland, the grass became almost waist-high, and for a while she had to fight her way through it.

A cool wind sprang up, and sent dust flying in swirls. Miriam continued to wade through the tall grass, which showed signs of becoming shorter not far ahead. Her breathing came in sharp gasps, she was unhappy that fighting the foliage was taking so

much of her energy. At one moment she felt like sitting down in the middle of the grass and crying.

Eventually the grass became shorter, fading a grey-green to ugly yellow. Shortly afterwards, the terrain became a bit hilly, and Miriam tired from walking over the hills or around them.

"It was Sargon, the incarnate of Samael our creator, who sacrificed himself to the purity of the sacred flames of eternity. It was our Lord Sargon who leaped into the flames as his mother, Lady Tiamat, cowered in terror, confused by Marah the Scoffer," chanted the low voice of Milik Bale as he faced the sacred city of Borgdragon, the resting place of his Holy Lord Sargon, the Chosen Son of Samael. His four companions stood silently as he mumbled in a low voice, their heads bowed and arms outstretched in supplication to their lord.

The encounter took place without warning. Miriam, moving quickly around a small hillock, walked directly into the midst of five filthy humanoids that stood motionless. She could have kicked herself, for she had been walking with her head down.

The beast she'd just bumped into lunged directly at her.

Miriam immediately sidestepped, swinging her booted foot deftly up into his solar plexus. As the savage doubled up in agonizing pain, his comrades stood gaping with astonishment. Then she spun towards him. Before he hit the ground she pierced him with an energy bolt from the deadly fiber laser. Then, without thought, she shot the rest of them with the green bolts as well.

Miriam never knew how she had reacted so quickly; she couldn't even remember reaching for the weapon. She looked down ruefully at the five bodies on the ground as she replaced it.

Each man was dark and swarthy, with knotted muscles and long, matted hair and beards. They wore tattered clothing that, in this warmest season of the year, was light. In death they looked just as undignified as in life.

Miriam buried them quickly under loose soil at the base of the hillock. They were dirty, and she believed they probably smelled putrid too, although her uniform let in no smells. Then, after she finished, she resumed her trek.

Miriam was puzzled why the creatures stood there with no real fight in them. Shaking her head, she figured that perhaps they had never encountered anyone like her before, someone small, almost invisible, and so quick with her reflexes.

She continued her journey without further mishap. Fatigued, she covered ground more slowly now. Even the energy pills lost some of their effectiveness. Her water pouch was empty, and because she hadn't eaten solid food for many days her thirst and hunger made it harder for the pills to work. They still worked, although she had to take them more frequently to make up for all her lost energy. Only nine remained of the original 30. She finally arrived at the borders of Samaeltrek Range, only four kilometers from her target cliff.

Miriam stopped for a long rest, checked her bearings and found that she was doing well. Then she leaned back, her eyes open. She didn't want to be caught unaware again.

Her chronometer read 14:00 hours. She decided to leave again at 14:30, travel nonstop to the cliff base and scale it immediately. She didn't know for certain when the sentries Ruby told her about would pass by, and she was troubled by her encounter with the wild men.

Miriam was particularly worried about what might happen if the bodies of the five beasts were found. This would be easy despite their burial. Questions would most certainly be asked and suspicions aroused, and it would only be a matter of time before the enemy learned something was amiss. They would probably send out professional trackers to find the cause. Miriam didn't want to be exposed in the open any longer than necessary.

At 14:30 she resumed her journey. This last leg was uneventful, and she made very good time. She passed up through a long barren valley before reaching the pre-determined cliff at 19:00 hours. She was surprised she had made it to the cliff so soon, considering her size and nearly exhausted state.

Miriam paused only to scan the cliff. She spied the drainpipe 600 meters above her and 30 meters to the right. She moved quickly to the proper place, found the attraction spots she knew were there, put her anchors to use and began to scale the cliff.

Miriam had climbed only 200 meters when she heard a patrol moving below and to her left. She immediately froze against the dark jagged wall, her cloaking uniform blending easily with the coarse stone. Suddenly time seemed to slow down. She fervently wished she'd arrived sooner, or climbed much higher, or simply

slept back in her warm bed. Mostly she hoped the uniform would do its job and the patrol wouldn't catch her here and torture her.

But another part of her mind coolly remembered Ruby saying, "I know you'll succeed, Miriam, because you must."

Miriam struggled to push aside her fear, which controlled her mind for flashing seconds. Her heart pounded, and she was sure the patrol would hear it. To calm herself, she watched the patrol below her, remembering that Ruby told her to be observant.

This patrol had eight Soffonic members. Three looked like walking lizards. Four were from the same stock as the savages she'd encountered earlier, although these were trained and of a privileged slave class. The last one wasn't describable in its form and the darkness made it all the harder to see.

As Miriam silently hung on the cliff, she mused that inside Borgdragon Estate all of the slaves, except the lowest levels, were all blond and blue-eyed. This patrol of privileged slaves, was appreciated less because of their appearance, and were forced to work outside the estate.

Each member had a laser rifle, and the troop was accompanied by a dozen scent curs. Miriam shivered when she looked at them, for she knew no one could elude these animals once they got the scent. She remembered that the leader had a high-gain infrared scanner.

Almost as if on cue, one of the curs snarled a little, and the leader motioned the patrol to a halt. Miriam's heart almost stopped.

Scanning the wall above him with his infrared scanner, Quon Mush saw nothing. This disturbed him slightly, for he'd sensed a slight movement on the cliff, and his lead cur had given a low growl. Yet the infrared scanner showed nothing, and now the cur was still, its thick tail flicking.

Shaking his head in puzzlement, he motioned the troop on. Miriam hadn't realized she was holding her breath until the patrol was gone, and she let it out slowly, feeling dizzy. Her heart pounded loudly, threatening to leap out of her mouth.

Thankfully, the patrol passed by without seeing her. Her cloaking uniform had truly worked!

After they moved out of earshot, Miriam resumed her slow climb. Her muscles cried out in pain, and she had to pause often for rest. And oh, how she needed water!

Finally, she reached the drainpipe cover, and searched for the hidden entry hatch. She moved quickly to avoid being caught in the open.

Miriam was surprised to find the hatch right next to the drain, and quite visible, at least from close-up. She opened her pouch attached to her belt, removing a square key which she carefully inserted into a clearly identifiable square hole in the door. She knew from her training that any tampering with the door lock without the key would bring a good part of the cliff down.

The door, less than a meter in diameter, swung smoothly inward. Miriam removed the key and replaced it in her tool pouch. Then, crouching, she climbed into the open passage, disconnected her climbing anchors, and closed the door behind her. It locked automatically.

She lay in the dark for some time, relaxing her aching body in the misty coolness and panting in dry, rasping gulps. She caught herself falling asleep, and marshalling her strength, reached for her flashlight.

Turning the light on, she saw that she was in a low tunnel of combined rocky earth and metal. Gathering her strength, she started to crawl down it, following the dim yellowish beam of the light.

After about 20 meters, which felt more like 100, she came to the end of the passage. Flashing the light around, she found another door on the right-hand side of the tunnel.

Miriam dug out her square key again, and inserted it into the keyhole in the middle of the door. It opened into yawning darkness, and she swallowed heavily before cautiously entering and flashing the light around.

She was now in the unused drainpipe, which was about two meters in diameter. She turned and closed the door behind her, then replaced her key in her tool pouch.

The drainpipe was, like the low tunnel she'd just left, made of a combination of black metals and rocky earth. Only here it had been eroded to a dull shine by centuries of waste effluents flowing through it. Miriam directed her light in the direction she planned to take, and saw endless darkness.

Tired, Miriam huddled next to the cold, curving wall for a few moments. Finally her sense of urgency overcame hesitation, and

she prepared to move on down the tunnel to her goal that she knew to be some 15 kilometers away.

Before starting off, she activated an alarm sensor on her face gear. This would flash a red light in her right eye lens when she approached the first security alarm. She knew her exit was six meters ahead of this alarm, but she needed to be cautious all the same.

Every muscle protesting, Miriam forced herself to her feet and moved up the slight incline. Inside the face mask she licked her lips nervously although her mouth was dry; she felt that she would kill for some water.

Miriam forced herself on for what seemed an eternity in the endless pipe, pausing occasionally to rest her aching muscles and to pant for breath. Her stride grew slower and slower, so that soon she shuffled at a snail's pace. Her mind droned on in a walking sleep as she struggled on, so she completely lost all sense of time. Pressing on and on, she soon thought about nothing except the dull yellow glow shining dimly down the long tunnel.

She became aware of the red light flashing in her right eye, signaling her close proximity to the security alarm. She stopped dead in her tracks, and it was as if time immediately sped up for her. Millions of thoughts jumbled around in her mind, the foremost being how long the light had been flashing. Miriam felt panic welling up in her.

Her stomach felt as if there was a boulder in the pit of it. She groaned aloud, wondering what to do next. She shook her head to clear it, looking around trying to get her bearings.

Miriam wondered if she could possibly backtrack so she wouldn't be caught, but knew she couldn't escape the black ones who controlled this spaceport.

She sat down with a thud, leaning against the side of the cold, dark pipe, and stared at the black wall in front of her as she sucked one of her remaining energy tablets into her parched mouth. She tried to swallow it, but nothing happened, for her mouth was too dry. Then she tried to chew it, and coughed as the bitter powder gagged her and the little chunks stuck to the roof of her mouth.

If she hadn't been so tired, Miriam would have wailed in frustration. As it was, she tried anyway, but could get nothing out but a few dry sobs. She was far too weary for much more.

Miriam lay exhausted against the wall for an immeasurable time, her mind receding into a sleepy darkness only dully tinged with the thought of the black ones. The tablet, for some reason, dissolved and entered her thickening blood stream.

Miriam's weary mind cleared a little, and she wondered how long she'd been sitting here. She was exhausted, more tired than she'd ever thought she could be, and because of this, her panic was dulled. She struggled to think through the haze of weariness. Then she slowly crawled back the direction from which she had come and turned off the red light alarm.

Flashing the yellow light in front and above her, she saw that she had passed her exit hatch by only two meters. She hadn't triggered the spaceport security alarm!

Miriam felt a surge of incredible joy which, because of her weariness, was unreasonable in its intensity. She sat and stared at it in disbelief, but another surge of energy from the tablet flowed through her and she slowly stood, shaking. Then she fumbled for the square key, found it, and inserted it into the keyhole above her head.

The hatch swung down, stopping when it touched the floor. Miriam looked up, and seeing the room above her was dimly lit, turned off her flashlight.

The hatch was a replica of the one she had used at Samael-Borgdragon. She spied an amber light near the hinge, and painfully stepped onto the lip of the hatch. Then leaning against the inner face of the hatch, she reached up, and in repetition of her act 95 years before, pressed the light.

The hatch silently swung shut and locked. When the hatch closed, Miriam lay panting on the floor of a dark room. Wearily she raised her head to look around. Spying another amber light across from her, she painfully struggled to her feet.

After she pressed the light, a door silently slid open, revealing another room. She flashed her light around it, and made straight for the food counter mounted against the left-hand wall.

Miriam pulled out a long, flexible tube and inserted it into a tight opening in her face mask. She sucked in a long draught of the cool water, but her parched throat contracted in pain. Disregarding this, she continued to drink as she slid to a sitting position on the floor.

She dimly noted that the water tasted odd, but realized it must have rich nutrients dissolved in it. Miriam sipped and sipped until she drifted off to sleep from exhaustion, the water tube still inserted in her face gear.

Much later Miriam awakened, and after sipping more water, replaced the tube. Then, stretching, she realized that she felt good. Because she was in excellent physical condition, her long sleep restored much of her strength.

Sitting comfortably against the counter, she turned her flashlight on and directed it around the room.

The counter was also a desk unit. Mounted on it was a control board, and she pressed a button which lit the room. Then she checked her wristwatch for the time, and guessed that she had slept for about 16 hours.

Miriam remained in the isolated room for three days, regularly checking the desk unit communicator for the signal she knew would be relayed to her, signaling her departure. All of this time she still wore the cloaking uniform, for Ruby had warned her that the spaceport scanners would pick up any heat radiation that was unaccounted for.

During the three days, Miriam was not bored. She rested a lot, drank the nutrients, and practiced remembering certain mental and physical exercises. On the third day she took a short shower in the uniform, a shower that removed all of the dirt and stains from her cloaking garb.

On the evening of the third day, the signal came through. The Palean commercial space freighter she was to stow away on, the 'Loufauun', would lift off in four hours.

Miriam was astonished for she had expected to have an eight day layover to fully recover from her journey. Instead, she had only four hours to locate and board the Palean freighter.

Locating the ship was no problem, since she'd learned its position during training. The three-kilometer walk and long, tedious process of stowing away bothered her. She was still in a weakened condition, and just didn't know if she could make it in time.

As soon as she saw the signal, Miriam pulled her key out of the tool kit and inserted it into the keyhole of the exit next to the counter.

The door opened toward her and she stepped into a well-used maintenance corridor. As she turned to her right, the door closed behind her.

Chapter 7

Escape

Things on the outside weren't what Miriam expected them to be from her training . . . they were something else.

Experience has taught us to dispatch our special agents at the last minute with a tight schedule. Thus, they're saved from fear, doubt and indecision . . . they aren't given time.

29:05-03 NOAIM 6705-6N5

Miriam walked quickly along the well-lit maintenance corridor. Bundles of pipes and wires lined the tunnel from ceiling to floor. The passageway was only two meters-wide, so she'd be unable to hide if anyone approached. Miriam fervently hoped that wouldn't happen since she'd have to kill them, by hand if necessary. Already tired with aching muscles, she hurried on. Her luck held out; she met no one in the isolated passage.

Time seemed to pass too quickly as she passed intersecting corridors, sometimes jogging or walking quickly.

It was dark outside when Miriam reached the open ramp of the launch pad. She paused, checking her watch. It was now 02:15 hours, which gave her about 40 minutes to board the vessel.

Unfortunately, that gave her no time to plan out a careful boarding procedure, and now she could only do as she had been trained.

The trade freighter Loufauun stood in the center of the launch pad, about 500 meters away. Miriam sighed, upset since nothing protective stood between her and the ship. She would be in the

open, with nowhere to hide if necessary. The shower in the way station had cleaned her cloaking uniform, but this would be the real test of its design. While the security alarm in the drainpipe had been a floor-mounted pressure strip some 50 meters-long, this security system was a formidable combination of electronic and optical systems. Several roving patrols with trained scent curs also crisscrossed the entire area on both scheduled and random patterns. No one had ever successfully broken in or out of this spaceport.

Without further reflection, Miriam walked toward the Loufauun, her mind ticking off her steps as she observed her surroundings coolly. She looked neither right nor left, fully trusting the effectiveness of her cloaking uniform. If it failed her now everything would be all over in short order.

The Loufauun was a cargo class planetary lander only five kilometers in length and one kilometer in diameter. Its shape reminded Miriam of a machinery-studded pipe. She knew the Loufauun was powered by impulse reactor engines designed for planetary liftoff and a limited sub-binary reactor drive for space jumps. This ship was designed to leave the planet, rendezvous with the larger starliners waiting in interstellar space, exchange cargo, and return. Its cargo, like that of all the other ships dealing with this world, consisted of foodstuffs and slaves.

Miriam proceeded directly toward the nearest of the vessel's six massive pylon pads. Each pad was a length of 20 meters to the knee joint, and another 20 meters to the hull hinge. Her goal was the hull hinge area.

Miriam had already passed a guard patrol moving 80 meters to her left, and could see another coming her direction. She continued moving swiftly and silently, measuring a steady pace. Her leg muscles rebelled and threatened to cramp, but she doggedly continued her measured pace.

At the pylon pad, she attached her climbing anchors to the smooth metal and began climbing steadily upward, looking only toward her first goal, the knee joint. Her muscles ached in her awkward climbing position, so she moved slowly to make no noise.

She quickly reached her destination, pausing to catch her breath and relieve her aching muscles. As she snuggled against the gleaming metal, the patrol stopped and flashed a light up the pylon

leg. Miriam held her breath, hoping she didn't make a noticeably awkward bulge.

The guard patrol moved on its way, apparently satisfied by the security of that portion of the ship. Miriam slowly let out her breath, then continued her climb.

When she reached the hull hinge of the pad, she located the hydraulic cylinder maintenance plate, which was some 30 meters higher up. She quickly made her way to it, and hanging from her two straps, began loosening its retaining bolts with a wrench from her tool kit. She was glad Ruby had made her practice this operation over and over with the heavy gloves on, for now she was quite adept at it.

Next to the plate she attached an alarm bypass unit. She didn't know how it worked, but trusted Ruby's good judgment in adding it to her tool kit.

Miriam quickly looked around, saw there were no patrols nearby, and swung the hatch open. She crawled inside and mounted a second alarm bypass inside the hatch. Then she removed her anchors from outside, retrieved the first bypass unit, and finally pulled the hatch silently shut.

Miriam acted mechanically, finishing in scant moments. Sitting uncomfortably in a crouched position, she began re-securing the bolts from the inside; she'd learned that all maintenance hatches were designed to be secured from either side.

After she removed the second alarm bypass, Miriam turned and made her way into the ship. She progressed through an airlock into a maintenance storage room, using the bypass units, and once inside, proceeded directly to a spacesuit locker. Removing the smallest suit, she tugged it on over her cloaking uniform. Then she climbed into the locker and closed the door.

Not more than two or three minutes later, the impact of pounding impulse reactor engines jolted her. This nearly knocked her unconscious, since she lay on an un-cushioned metal deck.

Miriam lost all sense of time, since she couldn't see her watch through the thick spacesuit. The impulse reactors had long since ceased in their throbbing operation and the uneasy quiet told her that the ship had entered sub-binary space for its estimated seven-day trip.

Sitting uncomfortably during one of her many waking periods, Miriam thought about her destination, the 'Freeworld'. The huge

Starliner Supreme G.C.C. Freeworld was one of 4,000 trade liners of its class. The giant vessel plied a regular circular trade route along the rim worlds of the sixth arm controlled by the Galactic Common Confederation. The G.C.C. was a commercial-political confederation spanning thousands of star groups, and the Freeworld, like her sister ships of the Rim Trade Monopoly, made regular scheduled stops in interstellar space between groups of nearby star systems.

The regular stopping points ranged from three to five light years between respective client star groups. Each system sent out small fleets of bulk cargo and passenger craft to the rendezvous point, where they boarded the liner and exchanged both cargo and passengers. Then the liner resumed its journey in the sub-binary plane and emerged in temporal space again at its next rendezvous point.

These mammoth starliners were designed and equipped for only sub-binary voyages, which traversed the speed of temporal light at a factor of 4,000 to one. A sub-binary jump covered 1,000 light years and took only four months Galactic Standard Time.

Each tour, or rim circuit, ran on a schedule of 1,300 years Galactic Standard, or a total of 5,000,000 light years.

The G.C.C. Freeworld now approached star system TL-4061 at the farthest extension of the G.C.C.'s borders and Miriam would board it. The vessel was scheduled for a ten-hour stopover for cargo and passenger exchange before leaving for its next destination of system TL4062, some 26 light years away.

When Miriam had first learned about the Freeworld, she was astounded. She couldn't comprehend the immense size and range of it any more than she could the size of Borgdragon Estate. She asked Ruby, "Does it ever land?"

"No, child, it doesn't. Vessels as large as the Freeworld don't approach a star system. If they need repairs, as they usually do after each circuit, they are placed in special space dock stations in interstellar space."

Miriam shook her head in wonder, and now, sitting sleepily in the spacesuit locker, she wondered once again what the inside of the ship would be like, and the people.

Miriam alternately slept and sipped water from her pouch, which she'd refilled at the way station. She only drank when absolutely necessary, for she had no idea how much time was

passing. Sometimes she felt as if hours had passed instead of moments, and vice versa.

She wasn't certain how long she'd be in her cloaking uniform and spacesuit. This would depend on how well she remembered her instructions. Now she doubted she could remember her own name, much less the long, complicated numerical sequences.

During one of her waking periods, Miriam felt something shift inside of her. She realized the Loufauun had moved out of the sub-binary plane into temporal space.

Shortly thereafter, the impulse reactors began to pulse, although only feebly compared to liftoff. When they stopped, Miriam listened to a long silence, hearing only the thumping of her heartbeat.

With a loud, dull clank, automatic grapples attached themselves to the Loufauun's hull, pulling it into the Freeworld's cargo bay for off-loading.

Miriam extracted herself from the closet and walked haltingly to the airlock. Her arms and legs were cramped from days of disuse, and her joints creaked as she moved.

Using the alarm bypasses she entered the airlock, and switched her spacesuit's breathing control from external to internal. Her atmosphere rectifier gear began filtering out unwanted gases and allowed her to breathe only the oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen in measured proportions from the suit's mixed gas atmospheric combo unit. She didn't know how long the gases would last, so she didn't waste time and left the vessel the same way she entered it, through the hydraulic cylinder maintenance plate.

Once outside the ship, Miriam secured the hatch and placed the two alarm bypasses in one of the many pockets of her spacesuit. Then, hanging by one of the anchors, she looked around to get her bearings. What she saw took her breath away.

The cargo bay was huge, though Ruby had told Miriam it took up only a tiny portion of one side of the liner. The bay was large enough to house five ships like the Loufauun, with room to spare. The Palean freighter stood alone in the bay, completely dwarfed.

Miriam marveled at the people who could build a vessel like the Freeworld. Then she looked out toward the cargo doors, so far away she could barely see them. She had no sense of distance here, and only the brightly shining stars gave the doors any sense

of shape. She only knew she must reach any one of the hinges on these cargo doors.

Frightened, she used her memory of Ruby as a focus. That cleared her mind of terror at the immensity of this place. Gauging the distance again, she aligned herself with the open cargo doors. Then she fired the suit's propulsion reactor, testing it with small bursts of energy.

The bay was in zero gravity, so she moved quickly and directly. As she approached the doors, they became more monstrous, filling her view though only halfway open. Their size was beyond description, and soon she could no longer see the edges.

Once she was close, she braked, floating in the middle of nothingness. All around her was dark, and she felt ethereal and disoriented for a moment because she could neither see nor feel any substance close to her. She suppressed the urge to look back, knowing she might panic at the distance if she did, and concentrated on realigning herself toward one of the massive hinges of the cargo doors.

The spacesuit's reaction motor once again propelled Miriam toward the hinge. Afraid the reactor was losing power because she moved slowly, she was relieved to arrive safely at the grey hinge. Miraculously, her lone, space suited figure escaped detection by the patrols she knew were at the base of the cargo bay, which Miriam suspected was primarily because she hadn't actually passed through the cargo doors, thus triggering alarms.

Miriam maneuvered herself to the first of the maintenance hatches on the huge hinge, and proceeded to open it. She had already transferred her tool kit to her spacesuit pocket before she donned it; she was unwilling to leave anything to chance.

Once inside, with the hatch secured behind her, Miriam slowly played her flashlight around to inspect the area before continuing. She stood outside of a roller-bearing race. Each of the bearings, more than a meter in diameter, was spaced about half a meter apart inside a gleaming metal cage.

Miriam also saw no way past the bearings and cage unit unless she crawled through the space between two bearings. This was dangerous if the door moved. She cringed at the thought of the massive cargo bay doors closing as she crawled through the cage, but she didn't know how long her atmosphere would last. With a

sigh of resolve, she plunged forward through the bearing cage and wriggled steadily until she reached the other side.

Miriam emerged into a much larger space between the bearing races, and saw a pressure hatch in front of her. Next to it was a keyboard assembly which she recognized from her lessons, and deftly she punched out a numerical code from memory.

She was delighted with the results; the hatch swung open, revealing a 35 meter-long maintenance tunnel which was obviously used for transporting replacement bearings.

Miriam moved cautiously into the tunnel and began floating slowly down it. In here she was still in free-fall, so she used her reactor unit to propel herself to the other end, and giggled because she felt like a bird.

At the end of the passage she saw another hatch, where she pressed a single activation button, and floated through into the bearing storage room. She pressed the button mounted next to the hatch which closed both doors at the same time.

The large storage area contained hundreds of bearings in gleaming racks and huge handling equipment in special stalls. Miriam floated through the room, musing that each bearing looked like a small silver spaceship.

She made her way across the chamber towards yet another airlock. After she punched in another long code on the accompanying keyboard, the lock hissed open, then, closed automatically behind her.

Miriam felt an odd sensation for a moment, then, realized what it was. Here the ship's gravity field came into effect at about 25 percent standard, and she found herself standing lightly on her feet.

Then she heard a slight hiss through the spacesuit's audio-link, and felt the ship's atmospheric pressure build up and press on her suit.

Once the airlock was fully pressurized, the sealed, opposite door automatically opened onto a maintenance loading platform. She stepped onto the platform, which was dark, and made her way directly to a lighted console against one wall. Recognizing the special keyboard, she carefully but quickly punched out a long and complex series of numbers and letters which her hand seemed to know by itself.

Miriam knew the correct code would summon a robotic maintenance cab to her. The Freeworld's complex computer system would also cancel all record of the order.

She waited, slumped on the deck next to the console. She was very tired, and wanted to go to sleep, but she knew her journey wasn't finished yet.

After a few moments, an ellipsoid-shaped robotic taxi glided into position next to the dock. Miriam stepped into the polished white vehicle and fastened the seat retaining strap around her space suited body. Then the car moved silently across the loading bay into a transfer tube, gliding along a winding route for nearly two hours before arriving at another dark loading dock.

During the trip, Miriam marveled at the Nashramh's preparations for such a secret system as the one she encountered since leaving Borgdragon. Ruby once told her that long ago, after many losses of sisterhood couriers and other personnel, Nashramh security made it a top priority to have secret, safe travel plans and way stations for their endangered and frequently wounded personnel. Miriam felt the plans and preparations were fantastic, and she was thankful for them.

She also dozed lightly. She was too pent-up to fall into a deep sleep as she would have liked, but she still felt a little rested after the trip.

The loading dock she stopped at was isolated and uninhabited. Miriam disengaged herself and stepped cautiously onto the platform. Behind her, the robotic cab sped off to wherever it had been before picking her up, its memory of the trip already erased.

Miriam glanced wearily around the dimly lit dock, and spied another keyboard. A sign above it, written in Galactic Common, read, 'ROBOTICS ONLY: This area deadly to all organic life forms'. Over the door next to the keyboard another sign read, 'RADIATION DISPOSAL FACILITY'.

Ruby had taught Miriam all of the codes she needed, but never the final destinations. All she knew was that somewhere on this massive Starliner was hidden a sisterhood apartment. The fact that she was now in a deadly zone bothered her. Perhaps she'd made a mistake in her last keyboard code. . . .

Well, it would not hurt to try this new keyboard, which seemed familiar. She went over to it and automatically began punching out

the longest and most complex code she had yet done. The characters were all in a language completely foreign to her, and she didn't know if anything would happen.

The code took Miriam an hour and 15 minutes to punch out; 20 minutes longer than her training sessions had taken. Afterwards she felt drained, but watched expectantly as the vault-like door swung open.

Miriam entered, and as the door closed behind her she spied another about 30 meters away. She passed through it into a long tunnel four meters in diameter. It was dark, and although she couldn't see the end of it, she began walking briskly down its length.

Suddenly, Miriam realized walking was harder than it had been. The gravity gradually increased until it reached about 50 percent standard.

Miriam moved along the tunnel until she reached a dusky entrance on her right. She turned and entered, the door sliding shut behind her.

A large blinking sign caught her attention immediately. In Galactic Common, it read: 'Remove your spacesuit and uniform. The atmosphere is compatible with your body's environmental needs'.

She followed the instructions and began removing both garments. But as she peeled off her cloaking uniform, a horrible, putrid stench permeated the room. Horrified, Miriam realized that it was her!

As her eyes watered and she gagged, she hurriedly discarded her uniform on the floor next to the spacesuit. Immediately afterward a door opened at the end of the room, exposing a brilliantly lit chamber. Now naked, she gladly entered it.

Miriam had to squint because of the brightness of the light. She heard the door hiss closed behind her, and then heard another hiss. Before she could locate the sound, her head began to reel, and she struck the floor, unconscious.

Chapter 8

Rebirth

Being alone in a room was normal for Miriam, and seeing strange images in a shimmering mirror was her only reality before leaving Borgdragon Estate. So, when the odd-looking Sisters of Orb appeared in another mirror, it came as no surprise to her . . . but her own image did. . . .

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The Sisters of Orb probed the inert body of their erstwhile guest, Miriam. They extracted blood samples and tissue scrapings for biopsy analysis, and thoroughly tested each of the bodily functions against known data. This disclosed that she was a high elf from the rimworld Mesziah.

They also learned the woman's body was in an advanced stage of a parasitic disease that would in short order devour the hapless victim.

The sisters conversed at length about the diagnosis. They weren't surprised at Miriam's poor condition, for most of their guest sisters, whether couriers or missionaries, were usually in worse condition. In fact, most were so far gone from either disease or massive wounds that a merciful death-dealing injection was all that the Sisters of Orb could offer.

Fortunately in this case of the elf Miriam, they weren't too late. Reversing the disease's effects would be a long, hard procedure, especially for the patient, but this was what their organization was about. They were healers; to beat the odds and bring about a full recovery to a stricken sister was, to these gentle beings, the

greatest and most satisfying of all rewards. It was for them life itself!

After a painstakingly thorough examination of their unconscious guest, the Sisters of Orb had the diseased body moved into a therapeutic holding room for preconditioning and parasitic destruction procedures.

Miriam regained consciousness slowly, Her mind seemed lucid, and her body felt oddly relaxed, as though she'd slept long enough to wash away all of her exhaustion and pain.

She raised herself up on her elbows, then sat up and swung her knobby legs over the side of the softly padded bed. Oddly, there were no covers.

The room was bathed in a reddish glow, subtly mixed with white. This odd light seemed to emanate from the ceiling, walls, floor, and even from the bed. Still, she could see fairly well.

Looking curiously around the room, Miriam spied a long orange tube hanging from the ceiling nearby. She reached out and pulled it closer to examine it, and saw a nipple on the end. It proved to be a liquid dispenser, and she enjoyed a few sips of cool, sweetly flavored water. When she finished, Miriam stood and appraised the strange room more carefully.

The chamber held a toilet, sink, bed, and shower stall. Miriam walked slowly to the shower nestled in the corner, and tried to open it. The door wouldn't budge, so she experimented and said, "Shower, please." Again nothing happened.

Miriam frowned, displeased. Suddenly she felt dry and wanted the comfort of a shower, but the door just wouldn't open. Just her luck she would end up with probably the only broken shower door on the entire ship!

Miriam returned to her bed, thirsty again. She drank as much water as she could hold, but still felt unsatisfied.

She swayed a little, and realized her senses were now becoming dull and the air almost unbearably hot. Still thirsty, she pulled the water tube with her as she settled back on the bed, and sipped it occasionally.

Miriam lost all sense of time. Hours flowed into days as the lights dimmed to facilitate sleep, and later brightened into the stifling heat of 'day'. She heard and saw nothing; she felt as if she and this room were the only things existing in all of creation.

She tried to fill her waking hours with various exercises she wasn't too weak to do, but her condition deteriorated until she could only lay on her bed, weakly sip water, and try to eat the rolls of soft bread that appeared next to her each morning. At first she had enjoyed the bread, although she soon became too weak to finish even one bite.

Her mind faded in and out of nonsensical, delirious dreams and she had to struggle to reach the toilet. She was too weak to notice her skin had changed, becoming less spongy and sagging like an old blanket on her. As time went on, it became tough and leathery, with the very top layers showering scaly gray flakes onto the floor when she moved. After an indeterminable time, her skin, bereft of both scales and the spongy underlining, simply hung on her like a leathery, grey fabric.

As her condition changed, Miriam became dimly aware she was always uncomfortable, though much too weak to realize why or to even care. During the final stage of her skin's change, her thirst was insatiable, and she drank never-ending amounts of cool water out of the long tube. It took most of her energy to suck at the tube, and she often fell asleep with it in her mouth.

Miriam's weariness was acute. When the lights dimmed she collapsed into a deep dreamless sleep, and awakened horribly thirsty. Then, even while the brilliant, hot lights burned, she would again fall into a light, dream-filled sleep, only to awaken for more water and 'night'.

Miriam awoke slowly in the dim sort of awakening that left her wondering if she was dreaming. This feeling was compounded by the sensation she was completely weightless. She couldn't move, and was content to float in her dreams on white billowy clouds.

She could dimly feel soft, smooth objects caressing her body and gentle probing in her open mouth. Her eyes were wide open, but she could see only a deep purple lightness-darkness and shadows, but nothing else. She sensed she wasn't alone.

Miriam's mind drifted. Her body was completely relaxed, almost to the point of not existing at all, although she could still feel the gentle probing. Then, once again, her mind slipped into a soothing nothingness.

The Sisters of Orb worked slowly and carefully on the body of Sister Miriam, who lay suspended in a zero-gravity operating theater. Their operating techniques were the most advanced in the

entire galaxy and of their own alien design and manufacture. No other race could even hope to compare to their advanced knowledge, there was no need since the sisters were singularly devoted to the art of healing. They were interested in helping others recover their health, not in competition or profit.

They carefully removed the now-dead parasitic skin residue from the suspended body, as well as from the tongue and mouth cavity. Then they gently blew fine dermal dust onto the newly exposed under layers of flesh. This was to coat and protect the tender flesh until it grew stronger and less vulnerable to mechanical damage and infection.

The surgeons purged all foreign remnants from the patient's internal organs and bloodstream with a bio-filtering apparatus, micro-precision surgical instruments, and their advanced Ultrasonic Penetrating Unit.

The entire operation went as planned with nothing left to chance. The intellect within the body was just awake enough to facilitate requisite body functions for the ultrasonic unit, but unconscious enough to feel little.

Once the operations were finished, the sisters left the body in the zero-gravity facility, to remain suspended for about a month. During this time, the new epidermal layers would develop and mature, while the patient remained unconscious with intravenous nutrients filtered into her circulatory system. After this part of her recuperation was over, she would spend two months in blue light therapy before being released for duty.

The Sisters of Orb left the operating theater. Everybody felt good about the success of their procedure, and all were eager to see Miriam's response. They'd been told she had spent her entire life with the disease, so her reaction to its cure and removal would be most interesting.

The sisters felt pleased to be of service and to see a once infected or badly mutilated sister restored to her original beauty. They could hardly wait to become acquainted with this one!

Miriam remained semiconscious throughout the month after the operation. With no idea what was happening to her body, she floated in endless dreams in the zero-gravity facility with the water tube clamped to her upper teeth and another intravenous tube attached to her right forearm.

Miriam awoke from her long living dream to feel new weight applied to her body and limbs. Unknown to her, the gravity was only 10 percent G.C.C. standard, but would gradually increase to 100 percent in the next two months.

She tried to focus her gummy eyes in the oddly lit room, but could only see strange images, as if she were in a deep purple or ultraviolet lighted room. Everything had a sense of unreality, including plaintive melodic music emanating from the walls.

Miriam tried to look at her arms and legs, but the lighting was so alien to her senses that she could only see a shadowy outline, much like that of a blurred photo negative. Feeling her skin, she was amazed. It was now taut and smooth with an unfamiliar softness to it she'd imagined Ruby's skin would have felt like. How she wished she could see it! She wanted to know if it was still an ugly gray or if its color had changed as well as its texture.

Miriam's mouth felt slimy, and her tongue lost its usual raspy texture. "Ugh!" She looked up through the strange light and made out the outline of a water tube. Reaching up weakly, her arm fell back on the bed before she could grasp it. She tried again, and succeeded in pulling the tube to her mouth.

Over the next few days Miriam grew stronger, and became used to a solid diet of bread rolls. She drank water with a completely different, but sweetly clean taste and nibbled at soft bread rolls left on a tray next to her bed each morning. Although they looked similar to previous rolls, they possessed a new, much deeper flavor. She recognized her senses of smell and taste had now intensified to a level she'd never before experienced. Before, all water and food tasted either sweet or neutral, though as she adjusted to her heightened senses, they became excitingly delightful.

The best part of her new condition was that she could now take the showers she had so missed. During her first shower she shivered in near shock, somehow feeling the coursing water much more intensely. She became comfortable with the new feel in just a few moments, liking the exhilarating sensations the water gave to her soft skin. Something had indeed changed about her, although she could hardly guess what. Whatever it was, she felt good about it.

Each day, Miriam exercised for as long as she could, gaining a new-found flexibility and strength. At first she could only crawl to

the toilet, but soon she began to walk upright and stand in the shower. Later, she began practicing simple exercises, building up her endurance. Finally she began practicing her fighting techniques in the middle of the room, for although she didn't know how long her stay would be, she wanted to prepare for the future.

Over the following two months, Miriam healed from her long, debilitating illness. She exercised regularly, showered, ate delightful meals, and slept for hours, feeling quietly comforted by strangely intangible persons.

Miriam stepped out of her refreshing shower, and noticed that the room's lighting was slowly changing. Astonished, she watched the deep purple fade into lighter shades of blue, and finally to a soft white light.

Her eyes adjusted quickly, and for the first time she could see the details of her room. But more importantly, she could actually see her skin!

Miriam looked at her arms and legs, which were covered with a soft, yellowish skin that looked and felt satiny. Delighted, she scanned her entire body, and her eyes were drawn to a mark on her right forearm.

Imprinted crudely on her skin was a rough tattoo with dark blue characters and numbers. The tattoo listed, in the Borg language, a serial number **901668-MB-40061** and a Borg symbol, the last mark being the Borgdragon cross. Miriam had seen similar markings on the right forearms of slaves and prisoners often enough at the fortress, but had never seen it exposed on her own arm before.

Suddenly, as if reading her thoughts, a soft voice emanating from the wall spoke. "We're awfully sorry, but we couldn't get that tattoo off of your arm. The materials of the ink have become as part of your flesh."

Miriam was startled by this voice, which was the first she'd heard since Ruby's. Then she realized that, of course, someone must have helped her become as she was.

Looking around, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Your voice apparatus isn't designed to pronounce my name, nor can you hear its tonal subtleties. You can call me Friend if you like," announced the voice happily.

After a pause the voice went on. "I, or rather, we are the Sisters of Orb assigned to this Starliner, the G.C.C. Freeworld by our sisterhood. We're specially charged with the rehabilitation of our

wounded and diseased sisters who are strong and resourceful enough to make it to our hidden section."

Miriam digested this, marveling at the seeming endless resources and plans of the Nashramh Sisterhood. "What does Orb stand for?"

The small voice answered after a short pause, "it stands for 'Orbinauchchouf', which in our language is the summation of our world, race, and purpose."

Miriam stood with her mouth slightly open. The name was an incredibly long one, and she couldn't hear many of the tones and nuances to it. She recognized these sisters, like the example of their language, was very advanced and probably were very deep personalities.

Friend went on. "You are fortunate you made it here, and we were able to help you. Your diseased flesh had not progressed enough to kill you. Many of our sisters are beyond all repair when they arrive here. In those cases all we can do is help them to sleep, and thus not prolong their present or future agony."

Miriam asked, "What sort of disease did I have? Is it all gone?"

"You had a poison-parasite inhabiting both your flesh and entrails. Dormant for reasons unknown to us, in time it would have killed you by inhibiting the functions of your internal organs. In the end, you would have had much pain and the inability to eat, sleep, and finally breathe. Yes, it has been completely eliminated."

Relieved, Miriam looked at herself again and smiled with excitement and delight.

Friend continued. "Miriam, I believe that is what your name is, when the door at the end of your room opens, would you go through it and down the hall to your right until you reach the next door?" As she finished speaking, a door opened into a dark hall.

Miriam looked around, spied the door, and started for it, saying, "Friend, I thank you for helping me. I will go wherever you ask."

About 60 meters down the hall, she came to an open door, and without hesitation stepped through. Silently it closed behind her, but Miriam didn't notice. She was already becoming familiar with her new surroundings.

She stood inside a large room that had a bed, toilet, sink, shower, desk unit, food counter, and shimmering mirror on the

wall. Most amazing to Miriam, however, was that it had a luxuriously plush carpet covering the floor.

Miriam went directly to the mirror, and visibly recoiled. She was shocked by what she saw. She was beautiful!

She was much better-looking than she had ever been. The grey, spongy skin was gone, as she already knew, but she had been unprepared for the perfection of her new skin. It covered her well and didn't hang or sag - it was taut and smooth, with no blemishes.

Her dark reddish-black hair was clean, although short. The radiation made all of it fall out, and it had just begun to grow in the past couple of months. The pixie style framed a pretty face with fine, delicate features and small, pointed ears. When Miriam smiled slightly, her face lit up.

She was slim, but well-proportioned instead of knobby and scrawny as her old, hanging skin had made her look. Her breasts were small and round, with tan nipples set against the soft yellow skin. Her arms and legs were also well-proportioned, and her pubic hair was the same red-black as on her head.

Most striking, in Miriam's eyes, were her beautifully long, tapered hands and feet, which now looked much different from the misshapen, flabby hands and feet she'd been used to.

The only thing marring her new-found beauty was the ugly and crude tattoo on her right forearm. But she was too pleased with the rest of herself to be bothered by this.

Miriam examined herself carefully in the mirror, and noticed the most changed thing about her appearance were her eyes. They were no longer yellow, but a milky white. The iris and pupil of each were still very large, and blended into a very dark red no longer dulled by diseased tissue. Something else was subtly different.

Miriam made a few faces at herself, and realized the expression in her eyes was deep and calm, in some ways like Ruby's had been. No matter how she changed her expression, the eyes did not change.

After these few seconds of discovery, Miriam for the first time in her life, burst into happy, tinkling laughter. She posed happily in front of the mirror, thoroughly enjoying herself and her new-found beauty.

Friend's voice chirped out, "Have we made you happy, Miriam?"

"Yes, you have," Miriam laughed. "The happiest I have ever been." Then she paused for the right words. "You do not know what you have done for me, and I will always remember you kindly for it," she said huskily, meaning every word of it. Her heart was suddenly full of happiness and hope.

Friend and the other Sisters of Orb were just as happy as Miriam, for they seldom had such successes. Miriam heard some faint tinkling and Friend asked softly, "would it bother you if we watched you while you are here?"

"Why, no," said Miriam, pausing in her posing. "You are my welcome companions. I just wish I could see you."

After a long moment, Friend hesitantly answered, "no. I don't think we would be pleasing to your eyes, for our species is quite different from yours."

Miriam looked at the mirror screen, since there was nowhere else to look, and said seriously, "my Friend, there is nothing I have not already seen that would frighten me. Whatever your appearance is, I truly want to see it. It cannot be all that bad, since I already know what kind of person occupies your body."

Without hesitation, the mirror swirled into familiar light patterns, then, focused on a room with numerous instruments and dials on the walls. Miriam guessed it was a control room of sorts.

Apparently the room was in zero-gravity, for floating just to the side of the screen was a flowing, jelly-like form. Its color was a soft, opaque white, and had what appeared to be light purple veins coursing the lightly pulsating surface.

Although the life form was different from anything Miriam had ever encountered, it was in its own gentle way quite attractive and not the least bit frightening.

Miriam looked at Friend carefully and broke into her wide, happy smile. "I will always remember you, Friend, and I will cherish this memory because you are the image I will always have of the angels of life and mercy. I do thank you for sharing yourself with me."

Miriam was indeed happy that she could see her friend, for now she no longer felt the loneliness she had since leaving Ruby at Borgdragon.

As soon as she had spoken, several small voices began to speak at once, and other bobbing forms found their way onto the screen. Miriam smiled to herself, musing that these Sisters of Orb seemed

so young and happy despite all the suffering and death they must often have to deal with.

"Tell us of your adventures!" said one.

"Do you like your room?" asked another.

"Let's sing for her," said another, and so on.

Miriam laughed and said yes to all of their questions, and began with a story of some of her lighter adventures. She spent several hours with the Sisters of Orb, listening to some of their rambling tales and telling some of hers, and by the time she went to bed that night she was acquainted with some of their ways.

Friend told her, with the help of several of her other sisters, about their life on the Freeworld and their home world. The sisters spent their lives in zero-gravity, since they had about as much density as water, although their bodies were much more complex. They communicated with each other and with their sisters on other ships telepathically, and this, Friend emphasized, was a secret she was sharing with Miriam because of who she was.

Miriam learned that the Sisters of Orb were in a major healing division of the Nashramh Sisterhood, and they loved their work. She also learned that they had an elaborately sophisticated culture and society, and the sisters made sure she had some firsthand examples of their lore.

During the next month and a half of her stay, Miriam formed a lasting friendship with these sisters, especially with Friend, who had been her first contact with civilized life after so much loneliness.

Miriam spent much of her time in front of the mirror screen, catching up on shipboard and major galactic activities. The rest of the time Friend and her sisters dominated the mirror-screen, bobbing around and teeming with questions.

One day, after Miriam finished reviewing the shipboard news, Friend came into the screen and mentioned that a package was on the way to her quarters.

"Is this for me? What is it?" Miriam asked.

"I don't know," the happy voice answered. "You ordered it when you coded our door computer. It could be clothing, though, since we were asked by the computer to make accurate measurements of you after we removed your diseased skin."

Miriam puzzled over this matter for awhile. Although she had memorized the codes so well that her hands could perform them by themselves, she had never known what they meant.

The package arrived during Miriam's sleep period, and the Sisters of Orb could barely contain their excitement until she woke up. As soon as her eyes had opened the screen lit up with the little bobbing figures giggling and urging her up.

She opened the large package with trembling hands, almost as excited as the sisters. She found several packets inside.

There were six pairs of panties. Miriam had never worn them before, but had seen them on women at Borgdragon and thought they must be horribly restrictive.

She also un-wrapped a black jumpsuit, a long black skirt, and a short black jacket. Each item was made of a strong silky material, and the jumpsuit was lighter than the other clothes.

With this uniform came a wide black belt equipped with a large, polished silver buckle; a small, round, black 'beanie'; and a pair of calf-length black boots with thin, hard soles and no visible clasps.

Finally, she pulled out a black purse, fiber laser, comb, toothbrush, and a specially wrapped package. This package contained her identification disc and a ruby-colored record crystal for the desktop video processor.

As she took her clothes out of the box, a chorus of high, chirping voices sang out, "put them on! We want to see what they look like! Put them on!"

Laughing at her support, Miriam complied. First she dressed, with the odd panties worn under her jumpsuit, which was in turn worn under the skirt and jacket. Despite the several layers, she felt remarkably cool.

Then, for the first time in her life, she combed her short, dark hair, and inwardly decided to let it grow long like Ruby's had been.

After combing her hair, Miriam donned her little hat which, although it seemed smooth inside, stayed on her head easily, even when she bent over.

Miriam twirled and posed in front of the mirror happily, admiring herself and preening. Then she postured, bowed, and performed all kinds of protocol stances from memory.

Her cheering sections were beside themselves. They giggled, with pleasure, while they admired their 'diplomat' sister. Miriam

laughed, for she felt happy at having so many friends applauding her.

Miriam was quite frankly impressed with herself for remembering all of the protocol she'd learned so many years ago. It had been a long time since she practiced, so she marched back and forth in front of the mirror, bowed, made hand signals, and so on.

Finally she was tired, so she carefully undressed and folded her new clothes on the wall counter. She would need them in good condition later.

Then she relaxed in her chair, looking at the crystal. She inserted it into her desk projector, and the mirror immediately began swirling. A stern-looking sister appeared.

"This is a top-secret document. It must be erased prior to leaving your quarter's tomorrow morning."

Miriam sat upright, and concentrated on the document.

The sister continued. "The following are personnel profiles of the Odomak contingent accompanying Sister Lynn Coytel, with whom you will make contact."

Miriam watched the recording for four hours, reviewing the information several times. It gave detailed profiles of Sister Lynn, her uncle Commodore Georgen Coytel, and brief profiles of the other 36 members of the group, including eight children. Also detailed were the profiles of four other passengers known to be agents of the black ones, and details of an assassination plot.

Miriam learned she would depart her quarters at exactly 09:00 the next morning for the park area near the Odomak compound.

She sat back after turning the recording off. She knew that she must be extremely cautious in her attempt to make contact with Sister Lynn, for if she wasn't, the assassination attempt she had learned about might take place sooner than expected because of her interference. Miriam had been given a great deal of information about the plot and where it would likely take place, and she was charged with warning Sister Lynn Coytel about it.

Finally, and most important, she would, after she contacted Lynn, remain with her no matter what happened. She would also leave the Freeworld with the other members of the Odomak party.

Miriam found the whole situation exciting. She would get to meet people! But she was also learning one of the ways of the sisterhood; her orders always came just before the operation. She

sighed, wishing she had more time to spend with Friend and the others. But orders were orders.

She erased the message after she become thoroughly familiar with it. Then, after eating and talking to her friends, she went to bed early. The Sisters of Orb weren't very happy that she had to leave in the morning, but they gave her words of support and friendship.

Miriam awoke the next morning, and jumped out of bed. She was excited about the adventures she was going to have. Perhaps she would even see a real live Mnemex!

She showered, then, forced herself to eat slowly while Friend and her sisters chattered to her. Friend said, "You will do all sorts of exciting things. And perhaps we will see you again, under better conditions."

Miriam agreed wholeheartedly, all the while wondering about her future duties. Somehow, having duties didn't seem as frightening as they had so many years ago when Ruby first touched on the subject.

As friend and her sisters watched, Miriam dressed in her new clothes. She decided to store all five pairs of panties in one compartment of her purse, and her comb and toothbrush in another. She placed her fiber laser in a holster pocket in her jumpsuit, and wore her identification disc around her neck on a thin chain.

Finally it was 09:00 hours. Miriam, who had been sitting at her desk and talking to the sisters, stood up and looked around the room one more time. She was excited to be leaving this place for an unknown future, but also apprehensive. She was also sorry to be leaving Friend and her sisters. They all watched her, flowing and bobbing about in the screen, as she performed a formal bow.

"I thank you Friend and your Sisters of Orb, for all you have done for me," she said formally, then softly, "Farewell". "I shall never forget you and your friendship."

The Sisters of Orb chirped farewells as Miriam's door swung open. With a final wave, Miriam stepped through the entrance into a passageway to find a single-passenger robot cab awaiting her. She entered the car, with a sense of nervousness similar to that she'd felt upon leaving Borgdragon, and fastened the seat belt.

She looked back at the door, and saw it had closed. Suddenly she felt truly alone again. She was a little sad as the cab moved smoothly and automatically down the hallway. She looked around and appraised her surroundings so she would feel better.

Miriam's trip took three hours. During it she thought about the recording she'd seen the evening before, and she began planning her tactics although she knew she would have to see the Odomak compound before finalizing them.

The cab passed through various airlocks, open storage bays, and kilometers of transit tubes. The vehicle was fully pressurized and suited to Miriam's needs, since it passed through a number of areas with a variety of different atmospheric conditions. Miriam had learned through the shipboard information news that much of the passenger portion of the ship was suited to her own physical needs. However, there were different sections for races that required special atmospheric and gravitational conditions.

One of these she passed through was an area filled with what seemed to be a thick, grey fog, while another contained swirling red gases. Miriam never saw any of the inhabitants of these sections, although she was curious about their physical appearance.

The cab finally pulled up to a dock in one of the transit tubes. Miriam stiffened, then, realized this was the end of her ride. She carefully stepped out of the cab, which immediately sped off, and entered the door that opened automatically as she arrived.

The room she found herself in was apparently a functional shower and dressing facility. It had two visible doors, but the one Miriam had just passed through was invisible, as though it never existed.

One of the doors had a sign above it in Galactic Common, which read, "Cryo-sleep Area." The other door, apparently an exit, had a sign which read, "Please have your identification disc ready for customs inspection and the purser's payment procedure.

Miriam pressed the door switch next to the exit and stepped out into a large passenger bay. Trying not to look too out of place, she strolled over to the customs counter and presented her identification disc to the inspector. The woman looked at Miriam carefully and inserted the disc into the ship's computer outlet.

While she waited for approval, the woman looked at Miriam again, noting the elf had the strangest eyes she'd ever seen. In a

noncommittal voice she instructed, "Please step to the retina scanner."

Miriam complied, and looked into the device, first with her right eye, then her left.

"Thank you," said the inspector, with no further ceremony. She handed Miriam the ID disc and said, "You may pass."

Miriam thanked her, bowing respectfully in the manner of protocol. Then she turned and proceeded directly to the purser's counter some ten meters away, next to the exit corridor. She handed the purser her ID disc.

He placed it on his scanner and after a short pause, said, "your total billing will be 2,800,721 'G' credits. Do you authorize the payment?"

"Yes," Miriam responded immediately, with no show of emotion. She didn't know what 'G' credits were, and she hoped the sisterhood had taken care of this too.

The purser handed back her disc along with a blue packet and said in a polite, but disinterested voice, "Welcome aboard our Spaceliner Supreme G.C.C. Freeworld."

With this, Miriam bowed respectfully, and replied, "I thank you kindly, sir." She then turned to the exit and walked through.

Miriam had gone about 20 meters when she stopped in shock. She had just talked to two living beings, the first two she had ever been in physical contact with in her conscious life! And she hadn't even batted a eyelid.

Frankly pleased with her ability to act casually without arousing suspicion, especially with professionals trained to identify any behavior that was out of the ordinary, Miriam proceeded to her cabin. The packet she held contained a welcoming booklet about the ship, her cabin's location, number and key.

Chapter 9

Freeworld

Social bias and open disrespect for people not conditioned to view themselves as inferior, is the source of rage and hostility in them. Miriam's innocence and unusual life as a solitary creature served to protect her from overreacting to these realities when they happened . . . but, there was something else.

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Miriam easily reached her cabin, which was near a park area adjoining the Odomak compound. The cabin was roomy, and arranged in the same pattern as the other rooms she'd stayed in, although it lacked a food counter. She realized she would be eating in public restaurants, as her program guide stated.

She quickly inspected her room, then, relocked it with the key she received from the purser. Placing her key and guide booklet in her purse, she walked to the park area to appraise the Odomak compound.

The park was actually a complex of recreational areas, planted gardens, fountains, shopping centers, and restaurants. Miriam knew from her guide booklet that the over-all area of the Freeworld's recreational facilities was 400 square kilometers, or 8,000 cubic kilometers. This was only one of 22 such parks. Each covered 18 square kilometers and had an 800 meter-high dome at its center.

A 10 meter-wide walkway bordered the park and separated it from adjoining staterooms and special complexes for the wealthy. Corridors led off this walkway to lower-ranking rooms, such as

Miriam's, and the various shopping, restaurant, and other recreational areas.

The entire complex was devoted to air-breathing bipeds, while other races who needed different atmospheres lived in complexes suitable to them.

Miriam was impressed by the statistics, but couldn't really comprehend them, even as she stood in one of the massive park areas near her cabin. She was too busy exploring her new and exciting surroundings.

The garden area was gorgeous, even more beautiful than the gardens she'd seen through the mirror at Borgdragon Estate - more so because she could actually experience it. Miriam walked slowly around, smelling the crisply cut grass and the perfumed flowers, which were in so many varieties that her head spun from the colors and scents. She stopped and gently touched one, smiling in delight at its velvety petals and sweet fragrance.

The bud came off, although Miriam had touched it gently. She picked it up, sniffing it, and continued looking at all of the other lovely flowers which her guidebook had said came from more than 50 worlds. She saw tiny flowers bunched in clusters, and large flowers with beautiful velvety leaves.

All made bright splashes of color against the dark soils and green grass, and everywhere she looked she saw brilliant blues, maroons, violets, and greens. She even saw some flowers that were bigger than she was; these were bordered by a static force field, and she guessed they were either poisonous or carnivorous. At one of them she saw a gardener feeding the velvety red flower a small, furry animal which she had learned was a type that bred particularly fast. She felt sickened as the flower digested it whole; quickly she moved to another floral area.

Miriam also saw trees of many varieties. Most were small specimens because of the restrictions on height. She touched the rough bark on one, and rubbed another so hard that she got a sliver. She saw many huge ferns and mosses, which made her feel strangely nostalgic, and even a creeping bush with brilliant blue leaves. In this lush floral setting small creatures flew and played.

Miriam was fascinated by the green areas; they were a paradise to her starved senses, and she couldn't get enough of them. But, out of breath from excitement, she decided to sit for awhile under one of the spreading trees.

She pulled her skirt under her knees and settled herself comfortably. She smiled as she watched a furry little animal waddle over to her, and squealed in delight when it crawled persistently into her lap. Then, stroking the creature's soft fur, she watched the people who passed.

All were bipeds, but of different races. One tall couple belonged to the Celevans, who were a bald, sensitive people, and three men were Phyrrians, with broad humped backs. Some had skins of different colors, such as ebony, red, and even blue.

Many ignored her as they passed, while others nodded politely and moved on. Miriam leaned against the tree trunk and smiled lazily at the animal in her lap. The entire atmosphere was one of peaceful relaxation.

After a while, Miriam moved the protesting creature and stood up. Now that she had walked so far around the breathtaking park she was hungry. She strolled casually to an area near the Odomak compound, and entered the first cafe she saw near a beautiful landscaped area with a majestic crystal fountain stationed in the center. This grand structure fascinated Miriam throughout her meal; it towered high above many of the trees, and water gracefully sprayed and leaped from and through its translucent spires.

Miriam sat at a table facing the fountain, and mused that the Odomaks must have superb taste to have chosen this area for their compound. She looked out at the structure for a few moments, enjoying the rainbow of droplets from high spraying water. Then, her stomach growling, she read the complex menu in front of her.

Will Hennik, lounging alone at a table in the cafe, glanced up over his serial compu-pad and noticed the young looking elfin girl studying a menu. Curiosity aroused, he appraised the girl's trim form.

Sipping his tea thoughtfully, his wry face frowning, Will tried to remember where he had seen this racial type before. The memory eluded him, but he knew no one of her type had been around this area during the voyage. Now that only 14 days remained until off-loading at Tannel II, she'd showed up.

He considered her carefully for a few minutes before folding his compu-pad and leaving for the compound security office. The girl could be just one of the cryo-freeze passengers preparing for the off-load procedure, but she could be something else, too. He didn't

like unfamiliar faces. One must always be careful with those vulnerable-looking ones.

Like most Odomaks, Will mistrusted off-breeds and the innocent-looking types so often used as spies. He planned to check this one thoroughly, then, report her to the others.

Everything on Miriam's menu looked good, but she had no idea what most of the items were. She confined herself to vegetables and fruit until she could find out at least what the other dishes contained.

She spoke into the table's audio-comm unit and ordered the number four plate, then inserted her cabin key into a thin slot on the unit. The transaction was duly recorded and acknowledged.

Miriam looked out at the fountain and spied the man she knew had been watching her. Smiling to herself, she waited for her meal.

A robotic waiter brought her plate within minutes. Miriam was delighted with the variety of vegetables, both hot and cold, and the fruit slices, all from the ship's gardens and orchards. With the meal came a large pitcher of iced water.

Miriam had never had such a grand meal before, and she took her time eating, savoring each new flavor. She displayed elegant manners as only the elite of Borgdragon Estate had, although here there were no slaves or torture pits from which her luxury was derived. She enjoyed using her practiced manners, for this was the first time she had ever eaten in public. It was fun!

Miriam thoroughly enjoyed her meal, and sat back comfortably in her chair, to sip the iced water. She decided to have all of her meals here in front of the fountain.

Afterwards, Miriam strolled around the park, taking in the beautiful sights her life of solitary confinement had withheld from her. Finally she grew tired, but unwilling to leave the beautiful scenery, so she sat on a low bench that encircled the crystal fountain. She watched the water gush and flow, and giggled when tiny droplets occasionally sprayed on her.

Around the fountain were numerous bushes with velvety leaves set into green grass. On them sat birds and other flying creatures, many with brilliant colors, and all around them played numerous small, furry animals like the one she'd held before. One sat by Miriam's feet and she reached down to stroke it. The little creature's tongue caressed her hand, and smiling, she picked the animal up and put it in her lap. Within minutes it curled up to

sleep, as she stroked its soft fur, listening to its contented purrs. Sighing happily, she looked around her, wishing she could live on this ship for the rest of her life.

Miriam's main concern now was to make contact with Sister Lynn Coytel. She had seen a number of Odomaks in this park, and recognized Will Hennik of the Odomaks' internal security at the cafe, as he watched her. She smiled to herself, musing at the man's obvious suspicions of her sudden arrival, but her thoughts were interrupted by the sight of two young Odomaks walking casually in her direction.

The two Odomak children, a boy of 14 years and a girl of 11, apparently were discussing the different flora surrounding the crystal fountain. The boy pointed out a bush next to Miriam. Then acting surprised by her presence, he coolly said, "good day." Looking directly in her eyes, his tone was arrogant, almost to the point of being insulting. "Now, I don't believe I've seen you around here before," he continued crisply. "Are you new to these parts?"

Miriam returned his direct look, smiled and said, "why, yes I am."

The boy was suddenly unnerved by her strangely soft eyes, and Miriam could see this beneath his attempts to cover it up. He nearly lost his composure, but quickly caught himself. Smiling too broadly, he introduced himself and his female companion.

"I'm Jenner Hardek, and this is my cousin Simmin Coytel. We're from that complex over there," and he pointed toward the Odomak complex.

"I am Miriam," she replied evenly. "And as you have so aptly noticed, I am new here. I have just come out of cryo-freeze today and am scheduled to off-load at Tannel II in two weeks."

Simmin, a dainty little girl, smiled coyly. "We're very happy to meet you, Miriam. I hope we shall see you again." She paused momentarily, and Miriam knew the child wanted to leave.

Simmin continued innocently. "We have to leave you now, for we're almost late for our classes." She bowed to Miriam, then quickly turned to leave. Jenner followed suit. "Yes, we do hope to see you again. Farewell for now."

Miriam nodded politely to the two children, saying nothing. She watched them leave her, their shoulders set stiffly, as they moved directly toward their complex. No doubt to report their impressions of her to Odomak security, she mused with a smile.

Jenner and Simmin walked quickly back to their compound, both very uneasy. Simmin was frightened by the elf's soft eyes. They seemed to look right through her and into her very soul, as if they thought little of what they saw. The pretty little elf knew just why she and Jenner had gone to her, and exactly what they were thinking right now. She would have to discuss this with her mother, Lynn, in private.

Simmin shivered involuntarily. She hated feeling so openly unnerved. It made her feel so inadequate.

Jenner stalked beside his cousin, muttering, "damn off-breed, I don't trust her." Even so young, he was already biased against anyone other than Odomaks. He especially disliked this little off-breed, who'd made him feel uneasy and out of place.

"She's definitely a spy," he remarked to Simmin when they were out of earshot.

During her stay on the Freeworld, Miriam developed a daily routine. Each morning, she arose and ate a light breakfast at her favorite cafe. Then, after a short walk around the park, she exercised in her cabin for three hours or so before showering. Afterwards, she reviewed the shipboard news before returning to the restaurant for lunch.

Her afternoon routines varied. Some days she wandered around through the park and visited the zoo, which had species from more than 50 worlds in them. On other days she explored the shopping areas and delighted in the multitudes of beautiful things that could be bought.

Miriam's favorite pastime, though, was sitting next to the crystal fountain. She enjoyed the leisure, but more importantly, she had a good view of the Odomak compound.

She knew that while she was absent, her room was searched. Sometimes she returned to it and felt someone hostile had been there before her. Miriam didn't care if it was searched, for she had nothing mechanical or electronic to hide. Everything she owned was in the black purse she carried at all times, and even then she had nothing traceable, such as a watch, jewelry, or gadgets to give any hints as to who or what she was.

This didn't go unnoticed by the Odomak security people who'd already made several searches of her room, checked the ship's records, and planted small surveillance devices in her stateroom desk. She was an anomaly to them.

Miriam continued her carefree routine for six days, enjoying herself thoroughly. But on the seventh day, something new happened.

Miriam, sitting comfortably on the bench by the crystal fountain with a furry pet in her lap, saw Sister Lynn Coytel for the first time.

Sister Lynn strolled around the garden bordering the shimmering fountain, giving lessons to several Odomak children. She looked casually at the beautiful fountain, and for the first time saw the strange young woman with a furry Quoulo curled in her lap. The woman, or girl, lounged on a bench next to the fountain. A tiny bird perched on her shoulder as the elf watched several furry Quoulos playing in the grass. The girl didn't seem to notice or pay any attention to the Odomaks who passed by, but then Lynn herself was an expert at unobtrusive observation.

Lynn coolly appraised the innocent-looking girl and unmistakably saw the small hand expertly give the sisterhood's emergency signal. Then nothing more happened. If anyone had been watching this girl they might have thought she'd simply flicked away an insect for all the reaction either she or Lynn displayed.

There was no follow-up signal, nor any acknowledgement that anything occurred at all. Lynn and her party continued on, strolling around the vegetation, and Miriam heard snatches of her lesson-giving to the children as they softly echoed around the fountain.

Miriam watched the Odomak group coming in her direction out of the corner of her eye, noticing Sister Lynn's cool appraisal of her. She easily picked out Lynn Coytel, who stood out from the others with her graceful bearing, aristocratic features, and dark hair. She had the royal Odomak nose that only added to her classic, if not cold beauty.

Miriam ignored the Odomaks completely and watched the furry animals playing in the grass by her feet. But, looking out of the corner of her eye, when she saw Sister Lynn observing her, Miriam chanced her only hand signal. She hoped Lynn noticed her motion. For if not, she would have to try other means. To be too obvious would be destructive for both her and Sister Lynn. All she could do was to wait.

Miriam didn't wait long. While dining that evening on a tasty dish of spiced meat and sweet vegetables, she received what was intended to be an accidental meeting with Jenner and Simmin. She knew, however, that if any of the black ones were watching her during the past few days, she was already targeted. The children had kept as far from her as they could since their first meeting, and now their sudden show of friendliness was too abrupt a change from their earlier hostility and unease.

"Why, if it isn't Miriam!" exclaimed Jenner cordially, smiling as if she were his oldest friend instead of someone whom he disliked. "We haven't seen you for awhile. May we join you?"

Without waiting for an answer, the two children seated themselves, making them more obvious to prying eyes.

"It is good to see you," Miriam laughed. "Do join me."

And so they did. Miriam finished her meal while they ate dessert, the three chatting casually about everything from the shipboard news to sports events. Then, as Miriam sipped a cup of aromatic honey tea, the children skillfully maneuvered the conversation to her.

"You're an elf, aren't you Miriam?" Simmin asked quite innocently.

"Yes, I am," Miriam confirmed. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh!" Simmin exclaimed lightly. "I've read that elves come from a mythical planet called Mesziah and they're expert musicians." Simmin inwardly flinched at this falsity in her own voice, knowing those soft eyes looked into her deepest thoughts.

"I do not know about being a musician," Miriam confided, "but I have been trained all my life as a singer. Of course my voice is not all that good, but I do know a repertoire of songs spanning the ages from hundreds of worlds."

"That's great!" Jenner agreed with a broad smile. "We're going to a concert, or rather a recital, given by three of our classmates. I think you'd enjoy it. Why not join us?"

"All right, when is the recital?" she asked.

Jenner checked his watch. "It's in about half an hour. We can get there early, since it's at our apartment complex, in our private theater."

Miriam finished her tea. Without further ceremony, the three rose and moved toward the Odomak compound. As they exited the cafe, Miriam noted the slight figure of Missella Lubin, one of the

four agents of the black legions she'd been briefed on. The black ones had her pegged now.

Now Miriam couldn't retreat from her assignment even if she wanted to, for if she did, all hell would certainly break loose. The warning must take place at the recital.

She gave no sign she had recognized the agent, but continued on with the children.

The recital was tastefully given, and the children were well-practiced in their lyrics. Miriam enjoyed herself very much, and she recognized many of the pieces sung.

During the intermission, Jenner asked if she would sing a song for the assembled group. Although he asked politely, his distrust came out in his tone, which was insulting. Some of the group's older members watched her carefully, if not suspiciously, to see her reaction.

"If you wish it, young man," she replied smiling. "But only one song, and no more."

Jenner's muscles tightened at her subtle affront, but he smiled graciously.

At the end of the short intermission, several of the children began an instrumental ensemble which had the adults smiling and clapping along with the music. After they finished, Jenner introduced Miriam to the group.

Miriam sang a medley of songs in the guise of one, which was of ancient Odomak origin. It was a piece of interwoven melodies, and when she had finished the last clear note, she saw that several of the older members of the audience had tears in their eyes. Then she decided to venture one more song which was of an ancient vintage known throughout the rim worlds. . . .

"Where there lies the path of true love
beyond and through legends past
Welcome to a vision of wonder, the
smile beyond the looking glass. . . .
"Span the lonely space between worlds
through the fields of blazing stars
Down a hidden passage you will find her,
the smile beyond the looking glass. . . .

"See the ghosts of lives past there
shimmering in a crystal screen

Visions of mysteries remembered,
visions of what might have been. . . .

"Treasure every fleeting moment
memories of futures past
Tears are just the jewels that sadden,
the smile behind the looking glass. . . .
The smile behind the looking glass. . . ."

Miriam frowned to herself. Something was amiss. During the song she had picked up a lute-like instrument, and after strumming her fingers over its tuned strings, she began picking out and strumming subtle melodies as only a well-practiced musician would.

She'd never seen such an instrument before, and didn't even know what it was.

After she finished, and people were milling around congratulating the children on their performances, she sat back with the instrument comfortably cradled and gently strummed it.

Sister Lynn Coytel approached Miriam as she played a tune on the instrument, and casually congratulated her for singing such beautiful and sensitive songs. Lynn had barely completed her statement when Miriam, in a soft, clear voice meant only for Lynn to hear, spoke in a secret language of the Nashramh.

"Sister Lynn Coytel, member of the Council of Seven, you are scheduled to be assassinated by agents of Adam Belial, four of whom are on this vessel now. Later, in privacy, I will give you the identities of 53 targeted sisters."

Lynn was surprised by the elf's abrupt manner, and her command of the secret tongue, but she realized that if the message was indeed true, it was in order.

She studied the girl for a few moments, and noticed the strangeness of those eyes her daughter had reported. They seemed familiar, but she couldn't place them. She would have to ponder this.

"Yes, we'll have to speak together in private," she toned softly. As she spoke, she signaled to her bodyguards, telling them to be ready for trouble.

The subtle signal didn't go unnoticed by Miriam, who sat still on the high stool and nonchalantly strummed the instrument. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the two men watching her with obvious distaste, displaying their normal Odomak biases. They

stood on either side of the theater door, and between them people slowly exited the large room, chatting quietly.

After the room had emptied of its audience, Lynn turned and stood facing Miriam while her two bodyguards posted themselves strategically to offend any hostile actions that might occur. Lynn spoke in a low, controlled, and chilling whisper, using galactic common.

"Just who are you? Who are you trying to fool with this talk of assassination?"

Miriam stood up quietly, and deposited the polished instrument on the floor beside the stool. Then she appraised this apparently hostile sister who challenged her credibility. She remained silent, waiting.

"Who are you?" Lynn repeated. "Just what is it you have to say?"

Miriam looked steadily at her and said in galactic common, "I am a special courier. Beyond that, you need know nothing." She spoke evenly, "And among my instructions are those of which I spoke previously." She went on to describe brief profiles on the four agents of the black ones who were aboard the Freeworld, and mentioned her encounter with Missella Lubin.

"The names of the 53 sisters will be given to you when you are prepared to record them properly," she finished.

Lynn stood at ease, waiting to hear whatever else this elfin creature might have to say. Then she turned to one of the bodyguards. "Please check security on those names immediately."

"Yes, my lady." He turned and left the room, and returned after a short time. He spoke softly to Lynn. "My lady two names on the list have been confirmed by our security people. The other two are unknown to us."

Turning to Miriam, Lynn spoke in a commanding voice. "You'll be our guest for awhile. If what you say is indeed true, you too are marked."

With this, she turned and gestured toward the open door, and Miriam complied. One of the two guards walked beside her.

He escorted her to a private bedroom. "You may rest here until my lady sends for you," the guard said gruffly. "Don't attempt to leave without permission, for this is private property and is not to be passed through without proper escort." He whirled about and exited, closing the door quietly behind him.

Miriam glanced around the room, which contained only a bed.

She could thoroughly understand Sister Lynn's open hostility towards her, for she was unknown to the Odomaks. However, she wasn't amused by their childish contempt for her.

Miriam lay upon the bed and, closing her eyes, thought about the next round of the encounter.

An hour later, the same guard returned. After politely knocking, he opened the door. "The Commodore will see you now," he announced.

Miriam sat up, and after replacing her beanie, allowed him to escort her to a reception area where she stood waiting to be announced. After ten minutes, the guard escorted her into a fairly large office.

Behind his large cleared desk sat Commodore Georgen Coytel, Sister Lynn's uncle and the leader of the Odomak contingent. He leaned back in his padded chair, his grey eyes narrowed as he studied her with obvious suspicion and distaste. Next to the desk sat Lynn.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable,"

"I prefer to stand, if you do not mind," Miriam countered, amused at his pretentious attitude.

"As you will," he responded evenly. "My niece tells me you have a list of names of persons who will be assassinated. May I see it?"

Miriam was displeased at the command, but her expression and bearing showed nothing. She remained silent.

"So this arrogant woman dares to disclose our sisterhood's secret communications to an outsider, does she?" Miriam thought to herself, although she didn't understand why thoughts like this came into her conscious mind as they sometimes did.

Coytel looked at her and frowned. "Well, young woman, answer me! Do you have such a list?"

Miriam came to an instant decision. "I am afraid I know nothing of what you say. You may, of course, search me, but I have no such list. I was invited here by two children from this compound, Jenner Hardek and Simmin Coytel, to attend a very enjoyable recital. Now I find myself an unwilling captive." She looked directly into the cool gray eyes. "I wish to leave now."

"Come now, young woman, you fool no one. You deliberately maneuvered your way into this compound. What is it you want?"

Miriam stood silently, unintimidated, and considered how she could kill the two and escape alive.

Sister Lynn had been watching this interplay intently from her unobtrusive position by the desk. She interceded.

"My lord, I think that things have gotten a bit out of hand. Perhaps if I spoke to the child alone this misunderstanding can be cleared up."

Coytel settled back in his chair and considered her request, his finger rubbing his dark mustache. He noted the creature's soft, calm eyes watching him - Intimidating eyes. He didn't like these off-breeds. They were treacherous and totally unreliable even if some of them were members of the Nashramh Sisterhood. This particular one had the uncanny ability to enrage him by only looking coolly at him with those eyes. He could easily hate her.

Coytel cleared his throat. "All right, Lynn. If you wish to haggle with this creature, feel free."

With this he rose, his crisp grey uniform crinkling, and marched purposely, almost angrily, out of his own office.

Lynn, who had been sitting quietly next to the Commodore's desk facing Miriam, remained in her chair. She measured the elfin girl coldly, wondering how to probe her opponent. Then, to her surprise, Miriam spoke.

Looking Lynn dead in the eyes, Miriam hissed with a terrible controlled tone of the Nashramh high order, "Sister Lynn Coytel, member of the Council of Seven, how dare you confide any of our secret communications to the profane?"

Lynn visibly flinched.

Then, without allowing her opponent time to respond, Miriam pressed on in galactic common. "Your uncle, Georgen Coytel, is considered by our sisterhood as being tantamount to our open enemy, to the same degree as are the vile black ones." She paused to let Lynn digest this, then continued.

"Mark you this, Sister Lynn Coytel. If either you, or this profane personage, in any way interfere with the conduct of my mission or attempt to harm my person, your name will be removed from the Book of Life!" Again she paused. "Do you understand?"

And without waiting, she said, "as for this profane creature," and she spat this out, "Georgen Coytel, any further interference on his part will result in our sisterhood hunting him down and delivering him to Adam Belial!"

Throughout this tirade Lynn sat listening almost in a state of shock. She suddenly remembered what it was in those eyes that frightened her even more than the words spoken. They were the eyes of one of the Nashramh's Ancient Ones.

Lynn's heart leaped, and her eyes widened in un-concealable terror. She remembered she had only once before met one of these ancient, powerful Sisters-Magum, a great many years ago. It was then that she'd seen and felt those soft, calm eyes that seemed to recede into the darkness of eternity itself.

She was angry at herself. She should have listened more carefully to her daughter, Simmin, who had accurately described these eyes. Unfortunately, she'd mistaken Simmin's descriptions as those of a child who had seen someone with eyes like her own mother's. If she had only listened to Simmin more closely, this terrible mistake wouldn't have been made.

Lynn regained her composure quickly, a product of her expert training and self-discipline. She took three deep breaths, let them out, and relaxed her suddenly stiff shoulders. Within a few seconds, she had lost and regained her composure.

She knew now that the game was over. She was no longer the interrogator; the other held the reigns now. All she could do now was comply with whatever the Sister-Magum asked and hope that she would not be forsaken for her arrogance and lack of foresight.

"I understand you clearly, Miriam. Or is it my Grace?" she answered softly, rising to her feet. "Please forgive my error and inability to recognize you. I will do whatever you ask of me."

Miriam looked at her, and saw the other woman's awe and, yes, fear. "But there is just me," she thought to herself, again wondering where the rash and powerful diatribe she had just presented came from.

"My name is Miriam, nothing more," she responded calmly. "May we please retire to a more secure place? This conversation is being monitored."

Lynn was shocked, then enraged, although she hid her emotions carefully. No one, but no one, had the right to eavesdrop on a private sisterhood conversation. Not even Georgen, whom she knew was behind this. The audacity of that man!

She would take care of this intrusion as soon as she relocated Miriam to better quarters and learned what was required by her.

This was too important a matter to be tarnished by that fool uncle of hers.

Commodore Georgen Coytel had indeed been listening in on the conversation, and now felt the full impact of Miriam's words. He felt, for the first time in his life, that he was in the middle of something he couldn't control. He was by no means a coward or a fool but, in this case, he clearly understood what the odds were. The Nashramh Sisterhood could and would hunt down and destroy anyone they thought had interfered with their secret operatives, not even the entire Odomak navy could slow them down, much less stop them.

When he first learned of Lynn's membership in the Nashramh, from her own lips, he'd been curious, but hadn't seriously believed in the power of this secret order. She had, over the years, told him about astonishing things, which he learned later were just rudimentary to the sisterhood. He had also learned some of their deeper secrets through his listening and recording devices.

He'd never heard his niece so awed and frightened by any 'sister' in her life, and he had long since come to accept her as far more formidable than he, although appearances showed otherwise.

Suddenly he knew the sisterhood would do what the off-breed - no, sister - had said. And if she spoke with real authority, both he and Lynn were poised at the edge of the eternal abyss.

Coytel frowned and considered his position. But for all of his obvious biases and unchecked emotional displays, he was in the end, he knew, on the side of the sisterhood which his niece and other women in his family represented.

He was no fool, and now he realized he must put aside his biased emotions and do whatever was necessary to correct this dire situation. This elfin sister, or whatever she was, had some important and dangerous reason for disclosing herself to Lynn. It was like having a renegade reactor about to explode beside him at any time.

Georgen Coytel decided he would, without hesitation, do whatever Lynn wanted, no matter how strange or potentially dangerous the order seemed. He also knew the game of spying on his niece was over.

The Commodore returned to his empty office, and through his desk comm-unit, told his security people to dispose of the four alleged black ones whose names they had been given. Then, after a

moment, he decided to take a hand in the operation himself, since he never liked having anyone do his dirty work for him.

Lynn escorted Miriam to an apartment suite near her own, explaining, "if you would allow, I invite you to take your meals with me in my quarters. I don't think it's safe for us to leave the compound now."

"I agree," Miriam nodded. "And, I would appreciate your company." Then, after the woman left, she inspected her new suite.

There were three rooms. One was a living room, with a thickly padded couch, low table, food counter, desk unit, cabinet, and a shimmering mirror covering the entire wall. Another was a bedroom with a comfortable bed and a one-way view of the crystal fountain. Next to the bedroom was a bathroom with elegantly designed facilities. The entire suite was pushily carpeted.

Miriam was pleased. She'd seen similar, but bigger, suites at Borgdragon, and suddenly remembered in those were literary and musical recording crystals. Of course she was the only person who knew this, but she decided to look around the apartment to see if she could find any.

She opened the cabinet which, sure enough, contained a number of recording crystals. Miriam examined several of them, then carried several over to her desk. One showed a dramatic presentation, but she was not interested in this. She tried three other discs before she found one which filtered lovely, lilting music throughout the three rooms.

Miriam dimmed the lights, and lay down upon the soft sofa, closing her eyes. The music-producing crystal, as though it had sensed the light changes, caused the mirror screen to swirl in a rainbow of light patterns before it projected a hologram into the living room. Miriam opened her eyes and was thrilled, for she had been thinking about the garden area as she had closed her eyes, and now she saw the garden around her.

Miriam thought about her odd encounter with Lynn. The woman seemed to be afraid of her. Of course, she should have feared Miriam's words, for they were accurate, but Miriam sensed the woman feared her as well. She had accepted the meal invitations because she felt it necessary to learn more about Lynn to determine her own future actions. But Miriam had absolutely no idea what kind of courier she was, not what would happen next - this bothered her. All she could do was to wait and see.

After she left Miriam, Lynn headed straight to her uncle's office. She marched briskly into the reception area, and before his secretary could announce her presence, she burst into his office without knocking.

Coytel sat at his desk, instructing three security men to assign Miriam a bodyguard. He frowned at Lynn's breach of etiquette.

Lynn paused near the door, watching him. She knew he had overheard the private conversation between her and Miriam, or he wouldn't be giving these orders.

Coytel finished with his men quickly, seeing his niece's anger. "Finally, be certain that the girl has everything she wants," he said, dismissing them.

The men filed out of the office quickly and Lynn closed the door behind them. Then she turned to her uncle.

He settled himself back in his chair and prepared for the upcoming tirade. Cordially, he asked her, "May I help you Lynn?"

Lynn looked at him coldly, and in a low, controlled, and thoroughly chilling voice, said, "I don't want to learn that you've been monitoring my conversations with anyone ever again. Do you understand me?"

This wasn't what he had expected from her. But then, she had never been angry at him before. He said, "I do what I must for the safety of my people."

"Do you think if our sisterhood chose to do anything to endanger our people that you," she spat out, "could stop them? You are indeed naive, Uncle. It is fortunate most of my important conversations have been in our secret language or you'd already be forsaken by us."

Coytel started to speak, but she cut him off. "Don't you know it's through my influence alone that you've achieved such rank as you now have? Although you're an experienced and excellent tactician and strategist, you have, because of your blatant attitudes, burnt so many bridges that only my word has been able to aid you so your skills could be used to their fullest capacity."

Coytel had never considered this; he had no idea the sisterhood had any power in the Odomak navy. He wondered if he was really in this much disfavor.

"And how shall I thank you for these wonderful rewards?" he asked sarcastically. "Your sisterhood might be influential in our

upper echelons, but you don't control our organization. So, let's calm down and reason this thing out."

"You are indeed a fool, for you insist on cutting your own throat. Well, no matter. All I want from you is for you to perform only your assigned duties, and nothing more. You've made one mistake too many by assuming your security measures were to reach to me. I assume you overheard my conversation with Sister Miriam?" Her voice was cold.

"I told you. . . ."

"No more excuses. That time is past. From now on you will do as I tell you in this matter with my sister. After that we will decide the terms of our working relationship. If there is going to be one."

Coytel narrowed his eyes, holding his anger in check. Lynn meant business and he knew if he failed her this time he would never regain either her trust or that of the sisterhood. Complacently, he agreed, "I will do as you ask."

Lynn nodded sharply. "What have you done about our guest?"

He smiled grimly. "I've seen she has all the comforts, and she's been assigned a bodyguard. She will be treated with the same respect as you are."

"I want her to have two preconditioned bodyguards. I also want each member of our contingent to go through the psycho-scan again and search for any hints of neurosis or the triggers our enemies use. If you find anything out of the ordinary, and I mean anything, I want to know about it. Finally, if you've placed any devices in either my apartment or Sister Miriam's, remove them immediately. I'll know if they are not. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lady," he said formally. "Will that be all?"

Lynn didn't miss the slight. "No. Sister Miriam will take all of her meals with me. I want to know her tastes so that we may please her. I also want the best poison scanner you can find, thoroughly checked, and placed in my room before this evening's meal."

"It will be done."

Lynn looked at him long and hard. "Don't fail me, Georgen," she warned before she turned and left the office.

Coytel watched her go, frowning. That damn off-breed was a hell of a lot more than she appeared. Yes, she was a real power in the sisterhood or Lynn wouldn't be laying their lives on the line for

her. There would be more to come and he would stand behind Lynn, like it or not.

Georgen Coytel leaned back against a grey stone outcropping that bordered the green water pool, and spoke softly to his female companion. The setting was beautiful as the two nuzzled together and embraced in a long passionate kiss.

Consuella Meran observed the two Odomaks, who were oblivious to her presence and only concerned with their apparently illicit affair. She had instructions to kill the man whenever he was foolish enough to leave the compound alone. Now was her chance.

What occurred next happened so fast other pedestrians didn't see it. Consuella maneuvered her way through the thick hedge bordering the wide walk encircling the pool, and without warning, expertly threw a poisoned homing-dart at Coytel's exposed arm. Before the dart reached its intended victim, however, the Odomak woman spun away from him, rushed across the walk, and pulled the assassin out of the greenery. Coytel moved so quickly that Consuella was taken completely by surprise. Her homing-dart struck a compress-shield under his sleeve, and now Coytel's arm encircled her waist with a terrible strength that forced all the air out of her lungs. Within scant moments, the two Odomaks forced their helpless victim over to the pool's edge and held her submerged under the water so that she could neither struggle nor breathe. In a short time, Consuella Meran was dead.

Miriam turned off her visual-music and then switched on the shipboard news. She watched scenes of the recreational activities planned for the day and was sad that she had never attended any when she had the chance.

She watched the news program halfheartedly until she caught something strange. One of the Freeworld's passengers, a Consuella Meran, had drowned in one of the park's pools. The reporter noted this was a tragic accident that sometimes happened to careless passengers.

But Miriam knew that Consuella Meran was one of the four black agents she'd warned Lynn about.

After she'd been alone in her rooms for about three hours, Miriam's new bodyguards escorted her to Lynn's apartment for supper. Actually the trip was only some 50 meters away, but the Odomaks were taking no chances.

Lynn's own rooms were much like Miriam's. As soon as she made Miriam feel comfortable they sat down to a glass of red wine and chatted. They enjoyed a pleasant supper together and discussed shipboard news. Lynn mentioned nothing about the death of Consuella Meran.

As Miriam sipped a bitingly sweet after-supper liqueur, Lynn said, "I have a recording device for the names of our targeted sisters. May we go over them tonight?"

"In a little while," Miriam responded. "But first, I would like an explanation of the overt bigotry displayed by this contingent toward non-Odomaks. Other Odomaks whom I am aware of don't display such vile attitudes."

Lynn felt uneasy about the question but answered as honestly as she could. "There are five races of Odomaks that originate on worlds from two different star systems. Our system's primary world is Odomah which is made up of three primary warrior races; the Quoin, Shout, and the Homm, all of whom are aggressive and notoriously intolerant of outsiders. There is no excuse for it, but it appears to be a racial as well as a cultural characteristic of our people, who, by the way, comprise most of the Odomak navy for both star systems."

Lynn sipped on her drink and continued. "The other star system's primary world is Eretz which has two major races; the Obel and the Yopheth, both of which are very defensive in nature and are notorious for being liars and womanizers. But they are tolerant of other races and even mix with them."

Miriam listened to the explanation, then, returned to the original subject. "About our sisters, who are targeted by the black ones? Will you have difficulty in notifying them?"

Lynn knew that locating and warning each of the 53 sisters would be next to impossible, especially if they were already being watched by the black ones, but she still replied, "not at all."

Miriam knew Lynn had only given the usual answer, for she understood the difficulty of the task. However she was satisfied with her ability to carry it out.

The two spent the rest of the evening discussing the 53 names, most of whom Lynn did not know.

Chapter 10

Eaglespawn

Odomaks aren't easily intimidated, nor are they subject to cooperating with foreign powers . . . herein Georgen Coytel was different . . . he sensed powers and agencies that couldn't be thwarted, and knew enough to stand aside. This took uncommon courage for a man who knew only how to charge into battle and fight to the death. Then there was Sweet Sargon. . . .

29:00-03 SHABIN 6706-6N5

The remaining seven days of the voyage were uneventful. Miriam spent time alone in her apartment, studying the shipboard news, and various recording crystals, and practicing her Shamboni exercises. These were part of the Nashramh's special fighting techniques which each sister had to know, and they helped keep her body well-toned. She also spent time with Lynn, and through her learned much about the inner workings of the sisterhood of which she was now a part.

All of this time, the Odomaks were uniformly respectful and polite to Miriam, if not apprehensive. Sister Lynn was the only person who appeared genuinely pleased to see her, and they shared many meals together. The two remained inside the Odomak complex during the seven days, diverted by recitals, literary readings, and lectures.

Off-loading from the Freeworld took place during the evening of the seventh day. The procedure for transferring to the shuttle liner to Tannel II was quite simple, since the Odomak security teams had maneuvered their positions to check any assassination

attempts. The Odomak contingent left in force, and passed through a private expressway directly to the shuttle.

Miriam learned from Lynn that this shuttle, like most of the smaller vehicles the Odomaks traveled on, was their own property and was both well-armed and armored. The contingent went directly to their own compound on the ship, and without further ceremony took up residence. Their own security personnel had sanitized the area and swept it clean of unwanted devices.

Miriam was impressed by the thoroughness and smoothness of this operation. Although four of the black agents had already been dispatched by the Odomak security contingent, security took preemptive actions on the shuttle. Also, the people most often in Miriam's and Lynn's presence were above suspicion in their loyalty.

After exchanging passengers and cargo, the shuttle liner dropped into the sub-binary and headed for the Tannel II system, while the huge Freeworld continued its galactic journey.

The shuttle liner interrupted her journey and returned to temporal space after only four days in the sub-binary. All passengers, except the Odomak contingent, were surprised by the unscheduled delay, for the short trip to Tannel II usually took an unbroken three weeks.

The Odomak scout ship 'Eaglespaw' maneuvered into position alongside the shuttle liner. Shaped like an arrowhead, the Eaglespaw was only two kilometers-long with a breadth at her stern of six hundred meters. Grappling equipment from the scout vessel brought the two ships together and an interlocking tunnel was extended between them.

The Odomak group transferred to the scout ship in less than 15 minutes. Then the two vessels separated immediately, both dropping into the sub-binary without further delay. The Eaglespaw set her course for her base at Melsorn VI and Commodore Coytel, who held the highest rank, took control.

Miriam lay comfortably on her padded bed in her newly assigned quarters. The quick transfer of the Odomak contingent had been simple, and everything seemed to be in order, but for some reason she couldn't sleep.

She learned about the planned transfer from Sister Lynn just after she boarded the shuttle liner. The Odomak's destination was Phelhan, the second of eight planets circling the sun of Melsorn VI. The Commodore and his personnel were assigned to a naval

station on this world, which adjoined the G.C.C.'s Rim Fleet Headquarters. Miriam would accompany them and would go to the Nashramh Embassy located there.

Besides the Odomaks, only the shuttle's commanding officer knew of their prearranged transfer. The Odomak security team had again taken all precautions, and after a final check, the bodyguards took up positions outside of the sisters' quarters while they rested.

Miriam mused on how the Odomak's treated her. She was dealt with respectfully, although always at arm's length. None of the people knew why, but this off-breed wasn't to be slighted in any way, either by word, gesture, or deed, under the threat of a summary court-martial. Whoever she was, she commanded unquestionable respect. Miriam sensed these reasons behind their attitudes and behavior.

Miriam smiled sleepily to herself, thinking of the obvious confusion and apprehension from all of those who dealt with her, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

A terribly strong impulse nagged at her as if it were under her very skin. It wouldn't go away. She struggled awake, not knowing why, and rubbed her eyes. She felt strongly compelled to use the scout ship's communications center. Now!

Miriam climbed out of bed and dressed in her black jumpsuit and boots. She ran out of her quarters, surprising the guard outside her door. He followed her and saw she was headed directly toward Lynn Coytel's room at the end of the short passageway.

She quickly reached the room and entered without permission from Lynn's surprised bodyguard. However, he knew his duties with concern to the elfin girl, so he let her pass without question. Miriam walked into Lynn's room, where the older woman lay fast asleep.

As if sensing her presence, Lynn snapped awake. Then she saw Miriam, and a look of surprise crossed her face.

"Sister Lynn," Miriam said her eyes riveted on Lynn's. "I will ask you this only once, and offer you no explanation other than this request is the very reason for my mission and my being on this ship. It is of vital importance to the deepest interests of the Nashramh. Do you understand?"

Lynn looked into Miriam's strange eyes. She didn't know the substance of the request, but understood that this was the test upon which her very survival depended.

Without hesitation, she said, "I will comply."

Miriam continued. "Please see to it that I gain immediate and sole control of this vessel's communications center and control over the central dish antenna. Also, see that the ship breaks into temporal space at 06:00 and drops back into the sub-binary at exactly 06:15 hours, and that there are no questions asked or barriers raised."

Lynn looked at her watch, which read 05:35, and said: "I'll implement your orders to the letter."

She climbed out of bed and walked to her desk. Activating her comm-unit, she contacted Coytel.

"Georgen, this is it. If we don't comply with the following order, all is over." She spoke clearly, not worrying that Miriam was in the room listening. She then passed on the instructions to him. The Commodore said nothing, but simply nodded to her on the screen.

Then Lynn returned to her bed and dressed. "This way," she said, motioning Miriam to follow her. She led Miriam directly to the Eaglespawn's communications center, which had just been vacated by all of its completely mystified officers and technicians.

When they arrived, a single guard was posted at the door. Lynn saluted him, and allowed Miriam to pass her. The guard broke in.

"Excuse me, my lady, but I have orders to remain outside this door."

Lynn looked at Miriam, who quickly nodded and said, "just do not enter."

"I'll wait here also," agreed Lynn.

Miriam nodded again, then, walked into the large center. Left alone, she closed and secured the door behind her, then went to the middle of the room. Standing there, she didn't have the slightest idea of what to do next. She relaxed her shoulders and took three deep breaths, clearing her mind.

Suddenly, with the same unknown source of knowledge which had caused her to play the lute-like instrument for the Odomaks, she found herself walking to the primary transmitting console. Once there, she sat down in the too-large commander's chair.

Checking the time, Miriam noted that she had five minutes to wait until the ship broke into temporal space. She looked around,

feeling out of place in the empty control room, and saw numerous consoles with padded swivel seats in front of them. Each console was covered with brilliantly flashing lights, and something in Miriam's mind told her they were communication controls to the temporal and sub-binary reactor chambers and the other sections around the Eaglespawn.

Then she looked at the brightly lit console in front of her, completely mystified as to its purpose and what she was supposed to do.

At precisely 06:00 hours the Eaglespawn broke into temporal space with a sudden jar. Compulsively, Miriam's fingers began to play over the complex keyboard, directing the primary dish toward an obscure spot in space.

Suddenly, the ship's lights blinked out. After a few seconds, the red emergency lights came on. All functioning equipment had experienced an abrupt energy loss.

On the ship's bridge, at the engineering console, an officer looked at his computer readouts and gasped, "my God! That's impossible!"

Just as suddenly, the power surged back on and the dish antenna swung away from its unknown target to its original position. The entire experience was over in less than 20 seconds.

Coytel received a stammering report from his engineering duty officer, Mel Castor, as well as strange reports from all over the ship. The engineering report startled him the most. The ship's communications dish antenna discharged an energy impulse lasting precisely 18.632 seconds - this impulse released more than 120 times the total energy output of the Eaglespawn's reactor drives.

Coytel shook his head in amazement. How such a thing could happen was utterly impossible, but that was what the ship's high-gain calibrators had recorded. Mel checked the engineering linkage to the system three times to verify the readings. There had been no malfunction.

Coytel closed his eyes and shook his head in consternation. "Now what the hell did that off-breed do?" Instinctively he knew he'd done the right thing by letting the off-breed sister use the Comm-Center, but he hoped she wouldn't make other unreasonable demands.

He wondered exactly what she'd done in the Comm-Center, but his musings were interrupted by the bridge duty-officer.

"Sir, we're returning to the sub-binary."

He answered, "Proceed."

The vessel dropped back into the sub-binary at 06:15, but when Miriam hadn't emerged from the Comm-Center by 06:20, Lynn cautiously entered alone to see if she was all right.

Miriam sat slumped back in the dish antenna controller's chair, obviously exhausted. Lynn rushed over to her, and saw her face was pale and haggard.

The ancient eyes looked directly into hers, down, down to her very soul.

Miriam spoke slowly, with effort. "Lynn, I have completed my mission. You will be rewarded by our sisterhood; you will receive the promotion that you have awaited these many years. You have proved yourself."

She stopped, panting from weariness. Lynn wasted no time in escorting the exhausted girl back to her quarters, where Miriam quickly fell into a deep sleep.

The remainder of the trip to Phelhan went by without incident. Miriam rested from her ordeal and spent most of her time with Lynn. She did not speak of her mission.

No questions were asked about the strange transmission, and Coytel had the chief communications officer see to it that all reference to the occurrence was removed from the Eaglespaw's computer memory. He didn't refer to it in his log except as a temporary malfunction in one of the ship's computers requiring an interruption in the sub-binary trajectory.

* * *

The crowds waited in breathless expectation for the sign of their lord's return. For years they had awaited the prophesied time that his heavenly presence would grace them, and now countless masses waited in breathless expectation of this momentous occasion. The crowds waiting around Samael-Borgdragon's private spaceport were enormous; people were packed so closely they could barely breathe. But to them this did not matter, for they were the privileged few of the faithful who would see their Lord, Sweet Sargon, in person.

Already, preliminary sacrifices of grain, animals, and human slaves had been made in Sweet Sargon's name, and when he returned there would be a tournament of games for his pleasure. It was said that the size of these events would be unmatched even by the historical games of Rigel IV, which was reputed to have held 100 series of 10 gladiatorial and sacrificial pleasure games and had amounted to the sacrifice of over 1,000,000 people.

The priests of Samael's Love raised their voices in prayer while huge choirs sang beautiful, chanting hymns. Millions of the faithful joined eagerly in the hauntingly melodic chorus. These reverent songs filled the crisp morning air and could be heard far beyond the black walls of the giant citadel.

At the city center, Tiamat's altar glowed brightly as hidden fires below awaited her living sacrifices of infant children to her lord and master Gensargon, for he was Sweet Sargon - the Lord!

Numerous other altars, much smaller than hers, also awaited the sign of his return.

A sudden intake of air, spanning the breaths of millions, swept over the expectant crowds as they saw the sign. Their Lord was here!

High in the turbulent grey morning sky, a huge billowing action of the clouds surrounding the huge red sun caused them to flow from it, showing a wreath of brilliant white light surrounding the orb like a massive corona.

The masses of the faithful began to chant hypnotically. "Sargon! Sargon! Sargon! Sargon!"

The entire estate of Borgdragon became aglow with thousands of sacrificial fires, and the droning of chanting voices welled over the piteous cries of the still-living, burning slaves, some of whom at their own death shrieked, "Sargon is Lord! Oh my Sweet Sargon! Sargon!" The glows cast an ominous red over the sleek blackness of the city, and huge billows of heavenly smoke rose to greet Sweet Sargon's coming.

Again the crowd gasped the millions as one. The sign was increasing - the corona had become so massive that it covered a large portion of the sky.

Suddenly it dimmed, and straight out of the middle, with the blood-red sun as a backdrop, flew Gensargon's sleek space yacht.

The vessel descended amidst the rising white plumes of the heavenly fires.

Gensargon sat comfortably in his private lounge, sipping a fragrant liqueur and enjoying the soft breeze caused by six naked children who fanned him with huge exotic bird feathers. The giant view screen mounted against the opposite wall showed his Samael-Borgdragon Estate glowing with sacrificial pyres lit in the joy of his arrival.

The picture grew as his vessel descended toward the estate. Now he could see thousands of small traces of smoke lifting up from the grounds, each of which signaled the holy reverence of his loving subjects for him, their Lord, and for his eternal father, Samael.

Now, along the western coast of his estate, his fortress city of Samael-Borgdragon dominated his view screen with its plume of pure white smoke rising gracefully from Tiamat's altar, which glowed with the flames of 1,000 infants being sacrificed to his return. The pyre came closer as his vessel descended, and the yacht finally landed some 900 meters from her altar.

Millions of his loving and faithful sang out in joyous praise as the sleek gleaming yacht landed. Their voices swelled as Gensargon strode majestically out of his off-loading elevator, dressed in a loose white robe lined with a fine spun gold piping.

Gensargon stood at the head of the 50 meter-wide crimson carpet set aside for his feet only, and saluted the masses of adoring faithful with his special hand sign; the sign of the pyre of sacrifice. He held his hand out in a solemn salute; the thumb sticking out from three fingers held outstretched together, and his little finger held out on the other side.

He was pleased with his reception. The crowd roared with pleasure at his salute, then rapidly calmed in quiet expectation.

Two hundred meters away, at the end of the carpet, his own Flourtiamat awaited him, lying prostrate in a position of divine reverence, longing for her lord and master's return. In the tense quiet the faithful bordering the crimson carpet were also lying prostrate, each murmuring low prayers to Sweet Sargon.

Flourtiamat lay with her arms outstretched in supplication toward her divine lord. Her thin white priestess' garment blew loosely over her naked body, which belonged to him alone. Her heart swelled with joy at his return, for her life without his divine presence was torture itself.

Gensargon strode slowly to his chosen consort, and commanded her, in his soft, eloquent voice:

"Arise, my priestess of light, and join me in the sight of my devout children."

All of the faithful lying prostrate who could hear these words were overjoyed. They could tell their children of their good fortune in hearing their lord's voice, and his very words to his own Tiamat.

"Praise be unto you, my Lord," she whispered in ecstasy. She raised her voice to a shrill cry: "my redeemer has arrived! Glory! Glory!" With this, she gracefully rose and respectfully followed her lord into his command center, at the reverent position of six paces to his left and behind him.

The ceremonies lasted until the morning was over, commencing with thousands of hymns, prayers, and living sacrifices. In all 250,000 sacrifices were made that morning to the glory of Sweet Sargon. Then a break was scheduled until midday; the games would then commence. Gensargon would signal their beginning with a salute to his father Samael.

Gensargon, escorted by Flourtiamat, who still walked behind him, proceeded to his personal apartments, which were located fifty stories above the fortress' upper deck. As they stepped out from his personal lift, he addressed her with the question that had been troubling him for more than two years, which was the sole reason for his return.

Turning to face her, and touching her lovely face gently, he asked her, "Tell me now, what is the meaning of your signal to me about the Nashramh captive?"

Thrilled by his feathery touch, Flourtiamat forced herself to speak out. She quickly and accurately explained the entire interrogation with Sister Claren, noting that all of the record crystals with their entire 200,000,000,000 bits of information had been deposited in his private vault.

His blue eyes pierced her. "Did you examine them?"

"No, my lord. No one has seen them," she answered crisply. Of course she would never think to look at his private property. That would be an infringement on his personal glory!

Gensargon looked carefully at his beautiful consort.

Then, smiling, he strode briskly through his vast apartments directly to his personal vault. Tiamat followed, pleased at his reaction to her words.

Without uttering a word or pausing, Sargon applied his seal of power to the lock. The thick vault door swung open, and he went inside.

As soon as his personal seal had been identified, and he walked in, a soft voice which had been recorded more than two years before spoke to him from the vault's computer speaker. "Welcome home, Gensargon. Good-bye!"

Reports of the disastrous explosion at Borgdragon Estate reached the Confederation Communications Network within hours of its occurrence. Scrambled reports giving pieces of messages came in from all over the sector.

One thing was clear. The citadel was no longer there. All that remained was a hole in the side of the planet which reached 20 kilometers-deep and extended 30 kilometers out from the edge of where the monstrous wall had once stood.

Yet, there was no noticeable debris to show the black fortress had ever been there, for the reaction was a combination of explosion and disintegration. Only poisonous, radioactive particles had blown sky high into the planet's now turbulent atmosphere, and its orbit had been changed by over one degree. Death reigned everywhere, not only from the explosion and poisoned atmosphere, but also from earthquakes and floods.

Since the planet's orbit had shifted, all of its outlying satellites were either destroyed or thrown clear. Gensargon, Flourtiamat, and their entire planetary force were no more.

Chapter 11

Testings

Miriam's total lack of social experience was her saving grace since she never understood the real dangers facing her. She killed the first humans she ever met, and was despised by the Odomaks for being from an off-breed race. The significance of this escaped her . . . at least for awhile.

Now she was in Nashramh custody and tested for something neither really understood . . . but herein tests can be beneficial to both parties and can cause them to understand the unexplainable.

10:18-24 BENEM 6706-6N5

Miriam sat in front of her desk, watching the planet Phelhan grow larger in her mirror screen. The view was far more beautiful than she'd imagined, more real than the recording lessons Ruby had shown her of other worlds.

Phelhan was a large planet with a stabilized atmosphere of nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen, and a galactic standard gravity of 1.06 and 1.66 of normative pressure. It was a blue world, which had three major continents and expansive oceans. This mild-weathered world had been affiliated with the Nashramh for millennia.

Miriam was fascinated as the planet grew closer, soon filling the entire screen. The Eaglespaw headed directly toward the Odomak naval base situated near the equator, and all Miriam could see was the huge landmass in front of her.

Suddenly she felt a slight jerk of the vessel as the world's gravitational field took hold. This was quickly stabilized.

Down it plunged through swirling clouds, and Miriam could see, at first, the regional road squares, then smaller sections, and then the villages and cities.

The Eaglespaw touched down on the middle landing pad of the Odomak's sprawling naval communications station. Miriam didn't even feel the landing because it was so smooth, but she saw it on her screen.

As soon as the scout ship touched down, a klaxon sounded.

"Prepare for off-loading," rang out a computerized voice. Miriam, giggling to herself, gave the wall from which the voice had come a mock salute and said, "yes ma'am!" Then smiling, she gathered her purse and exited her quarters.

On her way to the ship's off-loading elevator she met Lynn. Together they walked to the elevator, and while other members of the contingent exited before them, they said their farewells. Lynn planned to proceed directly to her duty station and wouldn't see Miriam again.

As they stepped out of the elevator, two women approached Miriam. Without identifying herself, the shorter of the two said, "Sister Miriam, you're to accompany us to our embassy, and you're to speak to no one while in transit."

Miriam recognized from their manner that they were from the sisterhood's security police, and she bowed, saying, "Thank you. I understand." Then, without looking back, she accompanied the two to a waiting passenger vehicle.

The journey lasted only two hours. The transport car, which covered 80 kilometers per hour, moved along a straight, paved freeway into a fresh and crisp countryside. The transport was closed, but had small windows so fresh air could flow inside, and Miriam appreciatively sniffed the sweet, crisp air.

Neither of the two sisters spoke to her on the way to the embassy, so Miriam contented herself with the view. The scenery they passed through was rather drab, for it was an agricultural area, one of many owned and operated by the sisterhood's economic resources section. Miriam recognized many of the crops being grown.

Finally the transport pulled up to the embassy's main gate. The five sisters guarding it were polite, but thorough, and they removed Miriam's fiber laser from her hidden holster as a matter of course.

Then they let the vehicle pass, and Miriam had her first view of the surroundings.

The embassy complex was impressive. Surrounded by a ten meter-high stone wall that was seven kilometers on each side, the complex consisted of eleven large sprawling manor houses. These were located several hundred meters from each other and were ringed by clusters of enormous trees.

After passing through the main gate, the vehicle sped directly toward the manor in the middle of the complex.

Miriam stepped out of the transport, and looked up. High above, the leafy tops of the towering trees swayed in gusts of wind, and Miriam shivered when the cold air brushed past her. The weather was chilly, and the leaves on the trees were dark red and purple, signifying that autumn had arrived.

Her companions immediately escorted her to an office on the lower floor of the rustic manor house. She stood at attention before a large desk. Her two escorts stood poised slightly behind her, also at attention.

Behind the desk sat a woman who Miriam later learned to be Sister-Magum Vargo No yen, a fragile-looking woman with iron-grey hair pulled into a knot. She was attired in a tan bodysuit, and wore no ornamentation.

Sister Vargo's warm brown eyes flickered toward the guards, and they, seeing Miriam was at attention, turned and left the office without a word.

Virgo assessed her new ward carefully. Her instructions from Council Central were clear, but mystifying; the elf sister was a Sacred Courier of the Holy Trust, but she was to be tested as if she were a spawn of Gensargon's vile estate of Samael-Borgdragon. Yet . . . this elf's eyes were certainly those of an ancient one, while her body was perhaps of 100 years out of a normal lifespan of some 800 years.

Without smiling, she said, "Welcome to Phelhan, spawn of Borgdragon." she paused to let this sink in, watching the girl's eyes carefully. "You will be our honored guest for awhile. This will be a time for us to become acquainted with one another."

Miriam bowed politely, but remained silent. She sensed that the situation was not as it seemed.

Sister Vargo pressed a button hidden under her desk, which summoned her personal body-guard and military adviser. Then she leaned forward comfortably and appraised the girl.

Miriam stood at attention for several minutes while nothing happened. She intended to do nothing until this sister gave her an opening. Instead, she relaxed her shoulders and induced a Shambu internal exercise, which regulated her adrenalin flow and helped her remain calm.

Moments later, another woman entered the office, and immediately positioned herself next to the desk, facing Miriam. She was a strongly built woman, nearly two meters tall with husky shoulders and stout, muscular limbs. She looked like a rock who tolerated no nonsense from anyone, although in contrast to her physical appearance she was soft-spoken. Miriam learned later she possessed a beautiful singing voice that brought great pleasure to those who knew her. She was tough, but exceedingly kind in her normal relations with people.

Miriam sensed all of this about her and more. She felt the woman's power, and knew she was no match for this one.

"This is Sister Ellen Cush, your instructor for the next few days," Vargo smiled. She was pleased; Ellen was best equipped to handle the tests. Accomplished at military tactics, Ellen had killed more than 300 enemy commandos in personal combat and had commanded numerous raids into various enemy-held territories.

"Ellen wants to speak to you alone now, and will conduct a few tests. So, if you will kindly accompany her, you may begin your new friendship."

Miriam showed no emotion. She knew these sisters would test her and treat her as if she were an enemy. Sister Vargo's wariness told her this.

Her eyes flickered over to Ellen, and her heart leaped into her throat. She could remember nothing of her earlier training! But, a little voice deep in her mind kept repeating, "Remember everything? Don't be foolish!"

Ellen, who had been briefed earlier, gestured Miriam towards the door. "Please come with me, Miriam" she said in a soft voice. "Our classroom is on the second floor."

Miriam followed her silently. Side by side, they walked up a broad flight of marble stairs and down a wide hallway. Then Ellen threw open a door and escorted her into a well-lit room.

Miriam spent the rest of her day working on a battery of odd tests. She was asked what appeared to be random questions, and answered everything truthfully without discussing anything that dealt with Ruby and her own vague origins.

On and on the questions droned, running into one another until Miriam's head spun. Yes, she had been at Borgdragon Estate, yes she was a courier for the sisterhood, and no, she couldn't disclose the reason for her mission or the details of her past.

Over and over Ellen hammered at the questions that Miriam would not discuss, and over and over Miriam refused to reveal the answers.

She revealed all she knew about the Borgdragon Fortress, its personnel, and the things that happened there. Sister Ellen's impassive face registered brief shock at the monstrous things she told her, but Miriam was mechanical in giving the information. These details of the fortress alone were a wealth of vital information, and the days lengthened into long weeks, then into months.

Miriam lived in a room with only a bed, and she ate her simple meals alone. Her days were 18 hours long, during which she was examined both mentally and physically. All in all, her life was austere and rigorous.

During her first medical examination, which Miriam found uncomfortable, the doctors were shocked by the ugly tattoo on her right forearm. Vargo was summoned to inspect it, and at first she didn't seem to recognize it. She nodded, "So, you were a prisoner at Borgdragon. Then how is it you escaped? I've never heard of anyone ever escaping from the black ones."

She was met with silence, so she continued. "Perhaps they let you go as their creature? We shall see."

After this encounter, Miriam was subjected to countless tests and interrogations by Sister Ellen and her team of intelligence specialists. Each test was well-designed for maximum effect on the person being tested, and while Miriam didn't like them she could appreciate the reasons behind them. She was locked in a room alone for days on end with meager rations and intimidated to get her to answer the questions. The team also used other, more subtle methods, but somehow Miriam managed to keep her guard up.

"Sit down, Ellen, and tell me about this most unusual Sister Miriam."

Ellen Cush moved a straight-backed chair close to Vargo's desk and sat down without responding. Then after a few moments of reflection she cleared her throat and answered.

"Frankly, My Grace, our young woman is something else. On the surface she appears to be a Meszian High Elf, or some kindred race, but therein all resemblance ends. Her thinking, although archaic, is measured and logical. And, here we hit a real snag. Her primary knowledge and overall characteristics are pre-Borgdragon in most respects, but surprisingly modern and sophisticated in a few."

"What do you mean by modern?"

Shaking her head, Ellen smiled to herself. "Well, her fighting techniques are old navy, while her social and overall technical knowledge predates the wall . . . dating her participation in our affairs about 110 thousand years ago. But, to answer your question, she knows several strains of our strategic battle language that are only 50 years old . . . and these terms aren't known to anyone outside our diplomatic corps' staff level."

"What about her knowledge of the Black Ones?"

"I can't get a clear fix on whether she is telling me first-hand information, or feeding me disinformation. I'll have to work on this area before I can give you a valid answer."

"I see," Vargo nodded. "Make a transcript of her responses to your questions, and give them to me this afternoon. I'll check them out with council central and get back to you."

In between these interrogations, Miriam was tested on the gym floor for her expertise at sisterhood exercise routines and fighting techniques. Sister Ellen tested her by attacking the smaller girl swiftly and accurately, but pulling her punches and blows enough so they would hurt without damaging. No lethal weapons were ever used for an attack.

Miriam knew full well she was no match for this woman. She fought back as well as she could, because she realized she might be killed if she couldn't fight well enough.

Ellen was surprised to learn how fast this little elf was, and just how deadly she could be. Ellen was cautious by nature and training, but with this opponent she was doubly on guard. She'd been instructed not to kill the child under any circumstances or to

cause any serious damage. This was no game, but a test of the real thing, and Miriam knew some attacks Ellen had never encountered.

During her examination periods, Miriam surprised her interrogators further with her expertise in languages and her detailed knowledge of many special subjects. In this respect Miriam surprised even herself. She suspected she had learned a great deal more from Ruby and her lessons than she had thought. In fact, there were things that she didn't remember learning at all. She suspected her diseased body had caused her to forget much of what she was taught. Now that her body was fully cleansed and healed, her mind was clear enough to remember the things she would have otherwise forgotten. Still, it seemed odd.

Miriam had no other reasonable explanation for this strange phenomenon, although she didn't voice these suspicions to her interrogators.

At the conclusion of these intensive examinations, both the interrogators and the subject had a healthy respect for each other. Miriam had learned much about the ways of the sisterhood. Although the tests seemed unfair, the spirit in which they were given was one of respect. She was given a strict and rigorous regimen, which disclosed much of the test designer's character.

This was her first real-life encounter with the Nashramh Sisterhood, and despite the rigors, she felt even more a part of the sisterhood than before.

Sister Ellen Cush reported her team's findings officially to Sister-Magum Vargo Noyen in minute detail. The conference lasted several hours. She summarized her report by saying:

"Sister Miriam is, in my estimation, definitely one of the ancient ones. There is no question whatever in my mind about her abilities, and her loyalties to our order. Her knowledge is in many cases archaic, but also quite modern because much of it is in present use. She has disclosed information so damaging to the enemy as to preclude any suspicion of her affiliations." She cleared her throat softly.

"Finally, the area in which she refuses to respond to our inquiries indicates an oath of silence which she won't break. This too indicates a devotion, trust and loyalty, even if it proves to be to her detriment."

With this, she concluded her report. "We're agreed, then, that Sister Miriam, whatever her rank may be, is one of us," she affirmed to her evaluation council. "With your concurrence, I'll forward these findings to Council Central. How speak you?"

All concurred without exception. The report was accepted and duly transmitted to higher authority.

Miriam walked alone down the wide hallway towards Sister Vargo's office. For the past three days she hadn't been tested, and had spent several pleasant hours with Ellen. She knew the tests were over, although she had no idea what would happen next. Thus, she wasn't very surprised when she received an invitation to Vargo's office, the first in nine months.

She knocked on the solid wood door, then entered and stood respectfully at attention before the older woman's desk, waiting patiently to be addressed.

Vargo leaned back in her chair, studying Miriam's deceptive little figure. She smiled inwardly, then, stood up, extending her hand to Miriam with a slow smile.

"Thank you for sharing yourself with us, my sister. Now, I have some news for you."

Miriam shook hands with this lovely woman, who had smiled for the first time, radiating a youthfulness that belied her age.

Vargo continued. "You have been assigned to Riga V for some extended training. I think you'll enjoy that world because its inhabitants are beautiful and kind. The academy to which you are assigned is surrounded by all sorts of beautiful land and seascapes. Yes . . . I do think you'll like it there very much." She paused for a few seconds, looking intently at Miriam.

"I know your stay here has been hard, but we've both benefited from the experience."

Miriam bowed. "You may not believe this," she smiled, "but my stay here was not unpleasant. It was, in fact, very rewarding to me. I thank you, Sister Ellen, and the others, for all of your efforts."

She meant every last word of it, too. She never had so much attention, or a chance to test herself against real people. Just spending her time with people, even those who tested her, was rewarding in itself.

Vargo smiled again, that slow, spreading smile which lit up her whole face, thinking this pretty elf was indeed a sister of grace.

"Why don't we go to another room for tea?"

Miriam saw, for the first time, one of the manor's luxurious rooms. It was thickly carpeted and decorated with couches, tables, chairs, and artistic works. What interested her most was the huge fireplace, which radiated real warmth on this cold winter day.

She and Vargo sat together in front of this grand fireplace and enjoyed a leisurely tea. They discussed many of the current events within the sisterhood, and Vargo told Miriam about her upcoming journey. Then Vargo tactfully brought up a subject that had been pressing on her mind. "Miriam," she spoke slowly, "we have a young novice whom we are sending back to Riga V for retraining. She was sent to us from there although she is originally from one of the outer rim worlds." She paused slightly, then, went directly to the point.

"To be perfectly frank with you, she's in disrepute here, and has disgraced herself in our eyes. She's being ejected from this facility, which troubles me deeply. What I'm asking is this: will you allow her to travel along with you as your orderly, and see if you can help her? She seems to be like a fish out of water."

Miriam considered this request for a moment. "What is her name? And, what is it that she has done?"

Vargo sighed, and said, "Her name is Cecil Drubb. She has two major problems. First, she seems to have a total disregard for sisterhood values and teachings. Second, she attacked and nearly killed another novice over a childish squabble which was, believe it or not, over a piece of sweetbread. She has not responded to our inquiries, and is sullen and disrespectful. Her attitude is lacking in both humility and self-respect."

Then, raising her hand in a slight wave, she said, "Somehow I'm afraid we are at fault here by some failing we're too close to see. I sense that she could be invaluable to our sisterhood, but unless we can help her, she cannot become one of us. I don't want to see this child drummed out of our order, nor do I want to hurt her further."

Miriam smiled. "Please have her report to my quarters on the shuttle liner. I think I have something to offer her."

Vargo agreed. Then the two continued their conversation, finding common likes and tastes. Both knew they were friends, and their time together seemed too short, for each would like more time with the other in such pleasant circumstances. All too soon they had to part, since Miriam had to prepare for her long journey.

Chapter 12

Cecil

Cecil Drubb baffled us because she was a normal human being, used to a warm family and a provincial environment. Our training institutions, however, were geared to young women who were accustomed to being on their own and working in a cloistered atmosphere. In this respect, Miriam's seemingly hostile tactics came as a shock to Cecil, but had a beneficial effect on both women.

13:30-18 SHIKIM 6707-6N5

Miriam traveled to Spaceport Phelhan, escorted by none other than Sister Ellen Cush. She expected to be escorted by a couple of security guards, as was customary, and was pleased to see Ellen waiting for her instead.

Although Ellen was a tough interrogator, Miriam had an intrinsic liking for her. During the past few days they'd met a few times and become acquainted with each other under circumstances more pleasant than the tests. Once she'd even heard Ellen sing several songs, and was awed by her beautiful, ringing voice. She'd complimented Ellen on her songs, and Ellen surprised her by asking if she too would sing. Miriam smiled, then began with an Odomak love song and finished with a short faerie melody.

She and Ellen chatted on their way to the spaceport, which was located in the opposite direction from the Odomak naval station.

Spaceport Phelhan was a commercial port specializing in industrial and agricultural, exchanges, and displayed subtle undertones of Nashramh leadership and security.

As they talked, Miriam watched the lovely scenery. The vehicle traveled on a broad freeway that passed through plantations. Then with an abrupt change near a rocky cliff, they suddenly viewed a vast green ocean.

The trip ended too soon. In about a half hour they reached Spaceport Phelhan, and after taking a subway-cab, made their way to the shuttle liner 'Humphill Colony' in another 15 minutes.

Ellen saw Miriam to her stateroom. When they arrived, they were met outside the door by Sister Novice Cecil Drubb, who wore a sullen expression.

Cecil was a dark-haired, squat figure with otherwise average proportions. A single, bushy brow extended across the tops of her eyes, which were heavy-lidded and dark brown. They were set aside by a flat nose and puffy lips, all which seemed to droop.

To Miriam, at first glance she appeared to be homely, but upon closer examination she possessed an innocent beauty. Miriam mused that the problem of Cecil's appearance obviously stemmed from her poor estimation of herself, for she exuded a sullen, hostile countenance. Miriam decided that only drastic measures would help the girl.

The novice was accompanied by a security guard who formally turned her over to Miriam and left without further comment. Then Miriam ignored the girl and turned back to Sister Ellen.

"If ever I get into a scrap, I pray to God you are with me," she saluted.

Ellen returned the salute. "I will be . . . Good hunting." She then turned on her heel and walked away.

Cecil Drubb watched this curt exchange with growing apprehension. This elfin-looking girl was obviously her new officer, Miriam. She looked fragile and funny, and had strange eyes.

Cecil's apprehensions were soon rewarded. Once they entered Miriam's stateroom, the elf, without warning, slapped Cecil with a backhand thrust that left welts on her cheek.

The stunned girl instinctively raised her arms to protect herself without any thought of fighting back, her eyes wide with surprise. Miriam struck her again, about a half dozen times, so hard she was knocked to the floor nearly senseless.

"So! You think I'm just a puny little elf do you, hey?" Miriam hissed, kicking the doubled up girl in the ribs.

Cecil began to cry. Her head reeled and she felt completely humiliated. Then she stopped abruptly, for she was surprised to find herself back on her feet. Miriam had jerked her upright by her long mane of dark hair.

In shock, Cecil stumbled to attention, dimly realizing this elf was a seasoned killer who faced her with strangely soft, calm, but deadly eyes. She was terrified!

"Well now, my dear Cecil Drubb. Do I make myself perfectly clear?" spat Miriam.

"Ye . . . yes," whimpered the shocked girl.

"Yes what?" Miriam snapped, confronting the larger girl with her fists jammed into her hips.

"Yes, my grace!" Cecil nearly wept. Her eyes flickered; all she wanted to do was crawl away somewhere and hide from this monster.

Miriam's cool voice toned, "Now you belong to me Cecil Drubb. From now on you earn your right to speak to me, to eat, drink, to sleep, to defecate. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, my grace, I understand," answered the cowed child.

After this brief exchange, Miriam instructed Cecil in her new code of conduct, her new daily schedule, and her new cheery attitude. It was to be basic training from the very beginning. Miriam meant to give Cecil no time to be sullen.

Once the shuttle liner 'Humphill Colony' lifted off from Phelhan's surface and entered the sub-binary, Miriam commenced with Cecil's training. This vessel, a medium-range passenger-cargo ship of four kilometers in length, plied its trade between the Melsorn VI system and a cluster of star systems 6,000 light years distant. The trip to Riga V would take just under 13 months in the sub-binary, and Miriam intended to make full use of this time to retrain Cecil.

Miriam was in the habit of working out in a gymnasium daily; that is, when she wasn't imprisoned, of course. This is where Cecil's training began.

They worked together 16 hours a day as drill sergeant-tutor and raw recruit-student. During this drill Cecil learned various Nashramh Shamboni tactics and Shambu exercises, forcing her to follow a rough regimen of self-discipline and character building routines. Once Cecil mastered a new fighting technique, Miriam attacked her so viciously that if she didn't fight to the best of her

abilities she was in real danger of being killed. She learned this lesson one day when, after learning a few simple tricks that were designed to put an opponent off-guard, she acted as if the practice fight was a game.

In no time at all, Miriam had Cecil pinned to the floor and held her throat in a binding death vise.

"So. You think this is just a little game, do you?" spat Miriam.

Cecil barely managed to whisper, "no," and Miriam let go of her throat. Then, when Cecil was back on her feet again, the elf immediately began another attack, this time with a nerve twist, that paralyzed the nerves in parts of her body and rendered them useless.

Cecil, really frightened for her life, wholeheartedly used every defense she knew and even a few Miriam hadn't taught her.

Surprisingly enough, she caught Miriam off-guard, when the elf performed a parry just a second off-time. Then Cecil went in for the attack, but since she was so frustrated with herself she lumbered in enraged, and thoughtlessly dealt Miriam a death blow.

Miriam had, for several days, been looking for just this kind of opening. She knew once this initial frustration was expelled Cecil would become more pliable to learning.

She ducked the blow, and prepared a new, more rugged attack which would defend her from her enraged opponent while at the same time allowing the girl to expel her necessary frustrations.

The two circled each other for several long moments, each dealing the other painful blows. Miriam realized the girl had indeed learned several effective fighting techniques quite well, although she was no match for her. Then, as Cecil showed signs of tiring and her anger began to subside, Miriam rushed at her, and with several punches meant to hurt but not damage, had the bigger girl writhing on the floor.

"So, now you feel this is no longer a game, but a death match, hey?" Miriam kicked her in the ribs again. "Come now, certainly you have not lost your taste for blood?" she taunted.

Cecil was totally exhausted and, her rage now gone, felt only terror at the thought of dying at her teacher's hands. This was no longer any game, she knew, and she was frightened for her very life. She wondered to herself just how she was going to get out of this mess.

Miriam had no intentions of killing the girl. She would save that threat for future tests of the girl's fighting ability. Instead, she grasped Cecil's oily hair and roughly pulled her upright.

"Do not tell me you are tired? Your day has only just begun." Then she walked over to the gymnasium's bench and threw her a towel, telling her to shower and be ready for class in ten minutes.

That day was a minor turning point for Cecil. Although she knew she couldn't best her teacher, she had successfully vented her anger at her and had even gotten in a few good licks. Cecil realized she hadn't really liked hitting Miriam, but now she no longer felt as helpless and humble as she had. Maybe things would get better.

Things did get better. That evening, when Miriam looked at herself in the mirror, she frowned at the discolored bruises on her ribs and arms. But, the fight had been worth it, especially if Cecil began to learn something good and positive about herself.

Miriam still treated Cecil as she always had, but the girl no longer took the situation personally. Instead, she determined she was going to excel in everything she did, and perhaps someday she'd beat Miriam at something.

For several hours each day, Miriam tutored Cecil on current affairs, mathematics, astronomy, languages, physical sciences, technical subjects, etiquette and protocol. Cecil was constantly amazed by Miriam's command of both facts and details, and counted herself lucky to be learning some details about the black ones. Surely no other novice had learned such things from someone who had seen them firsthand!

Cecil's studies were rigorous, and Miriam seemed to expect far too much from her. She spent all her spare time studying, and at first loathed it. Then, as she came to like the subjects Miriam taught her, she enjoyed studying them and rattling off all the answers to her teacher. Miriam was not only tough, but she was also a rather entertaining instructor. She didn't lecture on her subjects, but discussed them.

Cecil's favorite part of her training occurred during the evenings, when, after a snack, Miriam sang a variety of strange and exotic songs, then, taught many of the beautiful and sensitive lyrics to Cecil. Cecil had never before realized that she herself possessed a beautiful singing voice. She fondly looked back on the first time that Miriam had ever seemed pleased with her.

As she prepared for bed one evening, she sang a sensitive song since music comforted her. Then, turning to close her bedroom door, she saw Miriam standing in the open doorway with a wistful and far-off look in her strange eyes. It was then the sullen young girl began to look forward to the evenings.

Eventually, these evenings began to include personal conversations. Cecil told Miriam much about herself and her home world, of which she had been so fond.

"A beautiful and green world it is, filled with wonderful green growing things and a special freshness in the air. You can get up in the morning and watch the sun rise high in the sky, and actually see the flowers and trees grow. Everything there is so green and alive. . . ."

Hesitantly, she told Miriam about how her parents had been killed in an auto accident, and her aunt turned her over to Nashramh representatives. These strange women delivered her into rigorous training in which she'd never seemed to do well, and she hadn't been readily accepted by the other novices who'd scorned her rough manners that were common on her home world.

For several years she was lonely, without any real friends. The other novices had sometimes been spiteful to her, since she hid her true feelings under the sullenness and they didn't understand. The tutor sisters, who were gentle in their ways, had asked her about herself although they had never really seemed interested.

There were many times in which she had wanted to kill herself, for she hated herself and the sisterhood that had taken her from the only world where she had fit in comfortably.

This was a common story for novices, but each dealt with her feelings and disappointments differently. Miriam listened to Cecil quietly, letting the distraught girl pour out her pains and resentments now that she had begun to trust her. Only later did she try to help Cecil to get her feelings into perspective by telling her a little about herself and the parasitic disease. She also tried to explain a little about the sisterhood.

"You see, Cecil, our sisterhood trains girls who have in some way made a commitment to them, such as you. Oh, you do not realize this commitment yet, but it is there. You are important to us, although you are as yet a novice. In you we see the potential we desperately need to combat the loss of the very soul of our galaxy to the totalitarian forces of Samael that threaten to subvert all

human compassion and dignity to raw slavery." Miriam paused for a reflective moment, then, continued. "I know this means little to you now, but you are in very many ways fortunate to be a part of our Nashramh Sisterhood. You have been chosen, not only because your aunt turned you over to us, but also because of your own special qualifications which have surfaced in our many tests of your inner workings. You're destined to become an intricate part of a very special cause that is dedicated to the rule of compassionate justice for all who share this galaxy with us. There are many girls like you who would give anything for a chance to travel among the stars and leave their own mundane worlds, but cannot because something in their souls is not yet ready to flower. Our sisterhood can see this, and does not choose these girls for a long time, until their inner commitment has been made." Again she paused, frowning a little.

"All I can suggest to you, Cecil, is whenever you are in your darkest moments, look to the future. See what has been happening around you and anticipate what will happen. Then, visualize your part in it. This will make your loneliness a little easier, for once you have consciously accepted your home in our sisterhood, you will never be truly alone again."

Cecil spent a lot of time thinking about this, and began to feel comfortable with herself and the sisterhood. Miriam was privately pleased to see the slow changes in her ward. The subject of Cecil's problems and past disgrace, however, were never mentioned by either of them.

For Cecil, this single year of training was one of the most important and the best in her life. She learned some of her own limitations and began to work on strengthening them. She also learned a little about how to control the helpless rage that sometimes welled up in her, and along with Miriam began working out scenarios on how to handle it.

But most of all, the lessons in protocol and etiquette were a godsend to her, and she learned them readily and took pride in using them at every opportunity. With her elegant manners she no longer felt so common and blundering.

Cecil began to like herself for the first time, particularly when she pleased Miriam with music and her well-learned lessons. She realized she had a quick and bright mind that made learning a joy.

By the time Cecil and Miriam arrived at Riga V, thirteen months after meeting, they were true friends.

Finally the day came when the Humphill Colony landed at Spaceport Riga. Miriam and Cecil had to part when they off-loaded, for each had different ways to go at the academy. Cecil was sad to be leaving her friend, and although her countenance had improved a great deal in the past months, she wore a long face. But, her face cleared when she saw the sister escorts. There were two for Miriam, and one sister escort along with a sweet-faced novice-teacher whom she knew were for her.

Chapter 13

Academy

Sisters-Magum, the highest order in our sisterhood, possess a secret means of instant communications with one another which is a perplexing phenomenon to those uninitiated into their ranks. They always know what is happening, no matter how distant . . . that is until Miriam appeared on the scene . . . then something new was in the making. . . .

09:30-22 SHABIN 6708-6N5

Miriam bid farewell to Cecil, first formally, then with a hug that surprised the girl. Then each was escorted to separate vehicles, for although they were both going to the academy, the complex was large and each was going to a different part.

The ride was enormously pleasant to Miriam. The two sisters were kind and chatted comfortably with her. They told her a little about their world and gestured at the scenery as they spoke.

The vehicle passed through the beautiful countryside which supported small towns and large plantations. Rigan society was only superficially technological, using both machinery and techniques from off-world sources. Their economy depended largely on agriculture and their resort industry, which brought the wealthy from many surrounding systems.

Riga V seemed to be everything that Sister Vargo promised, and more. The clean, sweet, fragrant air seemed to uplift the spirit. In the open car, Miriam sniffed appreciatively and let the breeze ruffle through her hair. Her two escorts smiled at her obvious delight.

After traveling three hours through the lovely green countryside and past low, green mountain ranges, her two sister escorts stopped for a short break at a mountaintop observatory.

Miriam stepped out of the vehicle and felt the cool wind gust and to whip her long skirt around her ankles. Then, following her escorts, she walked to the terraced balcony, several meters up some carved stairs. When she reached the top, her eyes widened and she gasped aloud.

She took in the lovely sight. The side she had just climbed up was made up of several small mountains, but it was the other side of this mountain that pleased her. Below she saw a shallow valley, and nestled in it was the sprawling academy. Behind the academy were two mountains between which she caught a glimpse of the sparkling blue sea.

Another gust of wind hit her and sent her long hair flying. Gasping for breath and brushing her hair out of her eyes, she followed her escorts back down the stairs and into the car.

The rest of the journey took two hours. When they reached the academy, Miriam was taken directly to her new quarters which, because she was a sister complete, and not a novice, was a private bungalow. It was a charming building with three rooms, a patio, and a flower garden.

Once in her rooms, she cleaned up. Then, gathering up her purse, she went for a short walk around the immediate grounds. Her watch told her she had 40 minutes until she had to report to a nearby administration building for her assignment.

Miriam enrolled in a series of galactic communications and economics courses designed to familiarize her with the inner workings of the Galactic Common Confederation. She had no choice in her courses; apparently Council Central had already scheduled her for these. None of her courses were involved with military or security matters, a fact that vaguely troubled her.

Life on Riga V was easy and pleasant, and Miriam developed a pleasant daily routine. She took all her meals with the other members of the academy in the students' mess hall, attended her many classes, and worked out in the gymnasium. She had no intention of becoming lax in her physical upkeep; besides she knew no one could ever be good at the Nashramh Shamboni and Shambu exercises unless they practiced often. In her spare time she took some classes in the Shamboni fighting techniques and

learned several new tactics. Later she took a part-time position as a teaching assistant in the Shambu body control practice.

Miriam also pursued other subjects which she studied independently in the academy's extensive library. She had no intention of becoming either specialized in any one thing or uninformed on any of the subjects she'd studied in the past. She wanted to be knowledgeable about everything she could get her hands on.

Miriam had several hobbies as well. She enjoyed exploring the nearby towns alone, and met many of the charming natives of Riga V, who were friendly and inquisitive about everything to do with other worlds. She enjoyed hiking tours as well, and joined the 'Ped Pounders' hiking club that organized weekly hikes to different scenic settings.

This club was made up of both young men and women who liked physical exercise and the joys of nature. For Miriam, who had been in isolation for nearly a full century, the thrill of open nature along with the company of so many happy people made each hike an experience to remember. She made friends easily and thoroughly enjoyed the happy conversations.

Miriam liked the evenings most of all. These were special because friends gathered together in large recreation rooms for companionship and conversation. She spent many happy hours in front of one of the large fireplaces learning about the diverse cultures making up the rim worlds which sent novices to the academy. Each novice appreciated the wonderful things about her respective home world, but was also eager to learn about the others. One night Miriam was asked to discuss her own world, and for lack of a better example she told them about Phelhan, saying her parents had died early and she had never seen Mesziah.

At these gatherings, local boys were always present, some with romantic notions, and others hungry to hear about other worlds. Miriam liked several of them, although not romantically. Occasionally she, the boys, and several novices would go out at night to look up at the brilliant stars, which sparkled against the velvety black night sky, and to gaze at the two moons moving slowly across the heavens.

Once in awhile Miriam asked friends to her bungalow for lunch, and they had pleasant conversations about all sorts of interesting things. One of her favorite people was Sister-Novice Pina Gripp.

This sweet girl missed her home world a great deal, describing it as, "a place where the grass never ends." She had a sweetly clipped accent and knew many stories from her world's folklore, which she enjoyed telling to Miriam. Miriam introduced her to the Ped Pounders, and Pina, who was petite and fair, took readily to the rugged activity.

Miriam also liked the company of Sister-Novice Lena Miron, who came from a nearby star system and whose older sister had already graduated from the academy. Lena was proud of her sister, and hoped to be like her someday; "great and graceful." Miriam found Lena was adept at the sciences and achieved high grades. Although she was a private person, Lena was high-spirited and loved every moment at the academy.

After Miriam had first been installed at the academy, she had asked about Cecil Drubb. Occasionally she and Cecil met over lunch and shared their experiences. Cecil had found her true vocation: music. She was active in the music department, and with several performances under her belt, had decided to develop a special performing group. She said to Miriam one day: "There is nothing like singing for people and seeing their smiles as they listen. It makes my life worth living."

Cecil was no longer the sullen outcast she had been, but a serious student bent on benefiting her sisterhood. She wasn't ashamed of her home world's culture any longer, for now she saw it in a much broader perspective. Cecil had learned that the sisterhood was a whole spectrum of cultures both strange and unique, most of which had primitive elements. She no longer felt either alone or extremely different from anyone else.

Sister-Magum Helene Ness stood alone staring out her long office window at the embassy garden. A short, mildly plump, and comfortable-looking woman with soft pinkish-white skin and dark hair, she was responsible for both the Nashramh Embassy and the academy. Her youthful appearance and gentle mannerisms belied her tough-as-steel interior.

Helene loved her work, especially with the young girls, all of whom had been separated from family and friends for the first time in their young lives. She spared no effort to make their stays at her academy as pleasant as possible, and as rewarding. She believed this early experience with the sisterhood would strengthen each

girl for an uncertain future. It would provide each with good and wholesome memories to sustain them in the bad times.

Helene was troubled by her instructions from Council Central with regard to the elfin girl, Miriam. She was to provoke her with questions the girl was already known to have taken an oath of silence on, then, imprison her in solitary confinement for an indefinite period. Helene had taken it upon herself to verify this strange order and to check further with Sister-Magum Vargo Noyen at Phelhan about this elfin sister. All indications showed Miriam was a loyal and true sister. The only curious thing about her was her single name, since all sisters were given two names. Other than this, she seemed just like everyone else around the academy, both active and happy.

Helene forced herself to think about how she would implement these orders since they went against her very grain. If only she knew the reason for such a summary order. Her inquiries hadn't been answered. She sensed it wasn't only an important order, but also a test of some kind. After thousands of years, she was still haunted by the affair with Ritah Colmon. That had been a different situation, but some people at Council Central never forgot an error in judgment.

Well, today was the day she planned to contact her security police and have a uni-cell prepared in advance.

Helene couldn't rationalize this order, but only obey it to the letter. She turned and went to her desk, then switched on her comm-unit. She told her secretary to summon Miriam to her office at 14:30, and to offer no explanation.

Miriam arrived at Helene's office promptly as ordered. She had no idea why she'd been summoned, and since she'd never met Sister Ness before, she couldn't anticipate the reason.

She was ushered into the Sister-Magum's office by a soft-spoken security officer, who remained standing behind her during the interview.

Sister Helene stood looking out the window, seemingly fascinated by some domestic animals playing outside. She ignored the girl who stood respectfully at attention in front of her desk.

Helene wondered how she could look this girl in the eyes and entrap her into a phony situation that would offer sufficient grounds for imprisonment. She closed her eyes for a second, took a

deep breath, and turned around to face Miriam for the first time. The soft, calm eyes looked right into Helene.

"From whom did you receive your Nashramh training, and where?"

Miriam appraised the older woman, and knew without question what was happening. It was written in this lovely woman's eyes, although her face and body showed only a disciplined coolness and official severity. The woman was being forced into an action that she didn't agree with.

Miriam sensed that this question was meant to entrap her and to provide grounds for some punishment or possible imprisonment, and she knew she couldn't answer Sister Helene's question. She could only play along and act the victim.

She remained at attention, silent.

"Did you hear me young lady?" Helene asked her voice crisp and concise.

"I'm sorry but I cannot respond to your question, my Grace,"

"Can't you? Just who are you? There's no secret order of our Nashramh Sisterhood that's above having to answer for Freeworld. None I've heard of. Just who are you?" she toned angrily.

Miriam didn't answer. Helene looked at her, knowing the elf knew that this charade was for the record. So she decided it was foolish to drum up a false case against this sister. If she must perpetrate an injustice, she would do it, but only on her own terms and not with a mock trial. She was damned if she was going to make a fool of herself in front of this elf and the security guard.

"I don't know who you really are, or why you are here," she said evenly. "But since you choose to leave me in the dark, I must have you placed under arrest until such time as I receive instructions to release you."

Now Miriam knew Sister Helene was acting under orders, and against her will. It was a curious way to test this woman, so Miriam surmised these orders were just a mask for something much more important, but as yet unrevealed. In her limited experience, she found the sisterhood did nothing unfair or that was otherwise unnecessary.

She looked at Helene and said nothing.

Helene motioned to the guard. "Please take this young woman to the security compound for internment. We'll look into this matter further."

Miriam bowed, turned, and walked from the now silent room with the guard. Helene sat down at her desk, suddenly feeling old and sick to her stomach. Other than that damned affair with Ritah Colmon back in 4N1, she had never in any of her many lives consciously mistreated or violated the rights of a fellow sister, or anyone else for that matter. Even the knowledge that the orders must somehow be important beyond her understanding didn't make her feel any better.

She sighed and rested her head in her hands. Somehow, the girl understood. There was no surprise or anger in those soft eyes, just understanding. Understanding what? There were games being played here.

Helene sighed again, then, called the security compound.

Miriam was escorted to her new home by two silent security guards; one joined them just after they'd left Helene's office. Both of her guards were obviously prepared for the worst possible situation, and never let their guard down. They had no reason to worry, for Miriam was calm and assured. She mused that it would be a folly for a sister to turn against another for any reason.

Upon her arrival at the security-block, Miriam was disrobed, photographed, and scanned for hidden weapons, any poisons or other deadly devices.

Miriam was then ushered, nude, into her new home, a cell. Then the door, about a meter-thick, silently swung shut behind her.

Miriam looked around, and saw she was in a nearly empty room. The floor and walls were made of a soft, but impenetrable material, and a toilet in the corner proved to be the same. In another corner was a fixed sunken shower head, and the floor was sloped toward a small drain. There was nothing else.

Miriam sighed. At least the space wasn't as gloomy as the prisoner cells at Borgdragon had been, since the walls and floor were off-white and the entire ceiling gave off a soft, translucent glow.

Miriam had no idea how long she would remain in this small room, so she decided to develop a routine of meditation and exercise that would keep her healthy and fit during her period of confinement. She could find no reason to be negative about this seemingly hopeless situation. She knew intrinsically that somewhere, something very important was happening, and she

would become a part of it. What it would be she had no idea, but it was apparently important enough to warrant having her kept out of sight for awhile, perhaps even forgotten, so no one could become suspicious of her.

"Well," she murmured to herself, "it could be worse."

Sister Helene studied the enlarged photo of the tattoo on Miriam's right forearm. The words 'Secret - For Your Eyes Only' were stamped in large red letters on the face of the photograph.

Helene had never seen such a tattoo before, but she could decipher the Borg language.

"That poor girl," she murmured absentmindedly to herself. "What the hell is going on?"

After thinking for awhile and looking at the tattoo, she came to the same conclusion as had Miriam. This damned imprisonment was no accident, and the girl was meant to be kept out of sight for awhile in view of something bigger being planned, which neither of them knew about.

Helene realized now that Miriam knew this when she was sentenced to imprisonment. It was this understanding she had seen in those soft eyes.

But she still felt rotten about the harshness of the situation. Why couldn't Council Central have placed Miriam in a private home or someplace more pleasant? Dissatisfied with the messy situation, Helene contacted security on her private comm-unit.

"I have two orders for you with respect to the prisoner Miriam, whom I have just sent to you. First, I want no records or mention of her incarceration to be released to anyone without my express permission. Second, I want soft music to be beamed into her cell six hours every day. Do you understand?"

"Yes my Grace." The security guard acknowledged her orders without further comment.

Helene turned off her comm-unit. The music part wasn't in her orders, for this prisoner was to be kept in complete isolation for an indefinite period of time. But here, in this embassy, Helene's word was law, and although she was aware of the importance of her orders, she felt it was just as important for the prisoner to have at least one contact with something civilized during her stay.

During her imprisonment, Miriam filled her days with a routine of exercising, showering, meditating, and sleeping. She felt it was

especially important to continually practice the Nashramh Shamboni and Shambu exercises, which kept her body fit.

She was surprised when the music first began playing, and surmised Sister Heline had put her foot down where total isolation was concerned and insisted on this. The music played was always soft and lovely, and reminded Miriam of many beautiful places.

Miriam's meditation periods were long, usually lasting for several hours. They were dream-like trances in which she could never seem to remember their vivid images and sounds upon waking. All she knew was that in them she felt as if she was somewhere else and doing other things. The trances came to dominate her existence, and they left her feeling happy and relaxed, almost as if she were not truly alone.

Unknown to Miriam, hours passed into days, weeks, then, months. Her time was pleasant and she felt fulfilled and happy. Finally, after 38 months, although Miriam didn't realize it had been this long, the thick, padded door silently swung open.

Sister-Magum Vargo Noyen stepped into Heline Ness's office. She spotted the plump woman looking out of the window on the snowy winter day, and cleared her throat gently.

Heline turned toward Vargo with a broad smile, and the two walked toward each other and embraced. It had been more than a century since they'd last seen one another.

Vargo had stopped at the Riga V embassy for a short break while en route to an undisclosed location a number of light years distant. She looked forward to her brief meeting with her good friend Heline very much.

Heline was looking forward to the meeting for the same reason. But in addition, she wanted Vargo's help in winning a release for her elfin prisoner Miriam. Although she knew there was an important reason for the incarceration, the situation had continued to tear at her conscience. She felt utter frustration that an obviously innocent girl should be completely alone in a cell for more than three years, with only music to comfort her.

After the two sisters greeted each other warmly, and before Heline could come to her point, Vargo handed her a sealed order, "Read this now, Heline. I think it'll take a weight off of your conscience."

Heline looked at her intently for a moment, then opened the communication, which bore the label R606602. With-out pausing

to say anything to Vargo, she addressed her private comm-unit, saying, "please get me security."

The guard captain appeared and said, "yes, my Grace?"

"Have the prisoner in cell 34 released into my custody immediately."

"Yes, my Grace," the guard agreed flatly.

Turning to Vargo, Helene asked, "May I know what this is all about?"

"No," said Vargo, smiling. "But, I can tell you that you've made no enemies, my dear. Besides, you did have music beamed in."

Helene smiled grimly. She decided to simply drop the subject. Either there was a security leak about the music, or this Miriam was much more than she appeared.

Miriam had just finished her monotonous meal of water and bread loaves, and her back was facing the door. She was startled to hear a voice say, "Please come with us, Sister Miriam."

She whirled around, and saw three security guards awaiting her. She murmured to herself, "So this phase is now over," as she rose and walked over to them. Then she passed through the doorway into the anteroom, and put on the soft white robe one of the guards handed her.

The two Magums chatted about old times for awhile, and generally caught up on events until Miriam was ushered into the office. Helene noted the girl looked fit and healthy, although she'd lost her tan. There was no sign of malice or accusation in her eyes.

Miriam bowed and stood at attention until she was addressed. Vargo was the first to speak

"Well, my dear Miriam, we meet again," she smiled. "Now you're going on a vacation with me to strange and exotic places." Her smile broadened, and she continued, "I have a great wardrobe waiting for you in my cabin, or more correctly, our cabin, on board the space freighter 'Exco'. It will depart in seven hours."

Vargo paused for a reflective moment. "You do wish to come with me don't you?"

Miriam smiled. "Yes I do." She was pleased to see her friend again and needed the change of scenery after her long confinement in the embassy's security cell.

She looked at Helene. "But first, Sister Helene, I know you did what you had to unwillingly. Please forgive me, but I was unable to

tell you I suspected what was going on when you clearly did not. I consider you to be a friend and a sister."

For the first time in her long life, Helene was completely speechless. Then she laughed, her soft face erupting in small wrinkles. "You have put my heart at rest."

But inwardly, Helene hoped to repay the ill she'd done to Miriam. Hopefully the time would come soon.

The three talked together for awhile, and Miriam found that she liked Helene Ness. It was obvious this woman wanted all of her students at the academy to have good memories, and Miriam assured her she'd had a rewarding education here herself.

Finally Vargo and Miriam had to leave for the Exco. Miriam was provided with her old uniform, a purse, and a fiber laser. Once she finished dressing, she and Vargo took their leave of the Rigan embassy.

The trip to their cabin on the Exco took a little more than six hours. Once there, Vargo showed Miriam her new room and wardrobe. As Miriam examined her new clothes, they talked together.

Vargo smiled at the girl's. "Miriam, we'll spend a great deal of time in recreation, especially when we transfer to a Starliner in a couple of months. This journey is a vacation, and you have been given no assignment other than to enjoy yourself."

Miriam thought about this for a few moments. Something about the arrangement bothered her. Why would the sisterhood have locked her up for three years and then give her an extended vacation? Something was missing; frowning, she told Vargo of her apprehensions.

"Well, my dear, this sort of arrangement is normal when our sisters are to be transferred for major assignments. Council Central never discloses the details until the personnel involved arrive at their destination, for the situation usually changes between the beginning and the end of a deep space voyage."

Miriam was aware of the reasoning, but she sensed there was something deeper in her own situation, although Vargo's expertly disciplined demeanor showed nothing but goodwill and happiness.

Sighing to herself, she decided to drop the subject.

Their two months aboard the Exco passed both swiftly and pleasantly, and before they knew it, Miriam and Vargo were

transferring to the Starliner Supreme G.C.C. 'Greenstar'. The liner was similar to the Freeworld, and she looked forward to exploring it with her companion.

Once aboard the Greenstar, Vargo and Miriam went directly to their cabin. As she looked around her comfortable room, Miriam wondered whether the Sisters of Orb were present on this ship. She intuitively knew they were, and she smiled to herself, remembering Friend fondly.

Her smile faded as she mused that perhaps somewhere aboard this ship another courier might be hidden away in the radiation area. If there was, she silently wished her luck and praised the lovely Sisters of Orb.

Miriam found her stateroom adjoined Vargo's and both were next to, of all things, an Odomak compound.

"Will we deal with Odomaks on this voyage?" she asked Vargo apprehensively. "I know nothing is ever done by accident in our sisterhood, and we are located right next door to them."

Vargo laughed. "You're so right, Miriam, but neither you nor I are involved with them. Our sister Many Turen has been assigned to one of the Odomak pathfinder teams, on what I suspect is some sort of joint venture, although I don't know what it is. Our location here is important only because we must always stay together for both security and tactical reasons. We don't like surprises."

Vargo was absolutely right, as Miriam knew, but she still had a bad taste in her mouth from her former unpleasant exposure to the Odomaks. She determined to be very careful in dealing with them.

Once she settled in on the Greenstar, Miriam developed a daily routine. In the mornings she listened to shipboard news and practiced her Nashramh exercises, then met Vargo for lunch. The two visited many of the shipboard attractions after lunch and shared dinner.

Exploration was more enjoyable for Miriam this time because she shared her many joys and pleasures with Vargo. Her companion seemed to be almost a child when it came to exploring, and every day they visited parks, zoos, shopping areas and new restaurants.

Miriam liked Vargo a great deal. She was a witty and hardy companion who, despite her years, thought, and acted with an aura of youthful jubilation. She was an experienced connoisseur of

fine foods, and she introduced Miriam to an astounding variety of lovely dishes from all over the galaxy that fit the elf's dietary requirements. Miriam had never known there could be so many varieties of vegetables, meats, beverages, and most of all her favorite, desserts.

Miriam fully enjoyed her vacation, but Vargo did even more. She had traveled to many places with many people, and in her eyes none of them had been as joyful and as vibrant as Sister Miriam. The elf seemed to find magic in everything she saw, and Vargo was particularly happy whenever she saw the glow of pleasure in Miriam's deep, old eyes. Vargo felt that life should be lived to the fullest, for it was so precious a gift, and few people seemed as appreciative of all it had to offer as Miriam. She just hoped Miriam would never lose that love of life like so many did after repeated exposure to tragedy and bitterness.

Chapter 14

Vacation

Nothing concerning our agents' activities is ever accidental, not even a three-year incarceration without explanation or a supposed vacation. Of course there are surprises and chance encounters that seem innocent enough . . . but then, there were Ben Condon's faerie flowers for instance. . . .

19:38-08 TALUM 6718-6N5

Miriam sat curled up next to Vargo on a public couch at an evening entertainment chatting contentedly together. Their first month aboard the Greenstar passed swiftly and they enjoyed themselves tremendously.

Miriam's eyes widened, in surprise. The magnificent display of holographic art changed into a psychedelic wonderland, but this wasn't what startled her. It was hot breath on the back of her neck and left ear.

Turning to see the panting creature behind her, she came eye to eye with a red-haired, bushy-browed Odomak with deep, laughing blue eyes and a lecherous grin. The grin had a wide gap between its upper middle teeth.

"Hello, little girl, may I have you for dinner?" said a low voice. The man bared more teeth and continued. "Ben Condon is my name, and eating little elves is my game."

Miriam momentarily startled, laughed, "My God! What are you, anyway?"

Vargo, looking over her shoulder, chimed in, "That, my dear, is an Odomak lecher in heat. They're usually kept in cages."

Miriam's eyebrows raised a notch.

"Why, you recognize me for my manly pursuits, eh?" He looked wide-eyed in dismay, and Miriam just had to giggle. "Perchance my reputation has preceded me?"

Miriam, had never encountered such a specter as this before. She found him corny, but charming nonetheless.

Vargo leered over at him. "You'd better join us up here where we can keep an eye on your hands."

"Thought you'd never ask," he replied with another wolfish smile, and seated himself between the two. Then, after a few more boastful remarks, Ben Condon sat back and thoroughly enjoyed the art show as if he'd forgotten the presence of his new friends.

Ben, for all of this bravado, proved to be a perfect gentleman, somewhat to Miriam's disappointment. After the art show he seemed quite tame.

"I've been watching you for some time," he confessed with a wry smile. "And I find you to be fascinating."

"Oh?" Miriam laughed. "How is that?"

"No, seriously," he protested. "You look like a Meszian High Elf, and you giggle and laugh like one. But there the similarity ends. Your attitude isn't elfish."

It suddenly occurred to Miriam that she'd never encountered someone else of her own race. Mystified, she replied, "and how should I act?"

Ben considered the question for a moment. "Well, all the elves I've ever seen, whether High, Middle, or Low Elves, would have been absolutely horrified at the very prospect of being eaten by me." He paused, rubbing his mustache.

"Then again, if they'd thought I was really a lecher, they'd want to find out for themselves, and I'd be in hiding right now." He looked intently at her. "You look elfish, but you act grown-up."

"Oh?" Miriam murmured.

"Yes, that's it! Elves are like little children, but you are definitely not. But," his eyes twinkled at her, "you're really quite charming."

Miriam smiled with pleasure. She liked this Ben Condon. Something in his merry eyes seemed hauntingly familiar, though, and in an odd way slightly saddened her.

The conversation turned to other things until Vargo and Miriam decided to leave. Ben made no attempt to accompany them but cordially thanked them for a most enjoyable evening.

Vargo liked the young man, who was so homely he was, in her words, 'cute'. "You can depend on it, Miriam," she confided. "He'll be back, and trying to get you alone."

Miriam looked at her, wide-eyed. "Do you really think he is a lecher, Vargo?"

Vargo laughed softly to herself. "No, I doubt it. The way he looks at you suggests more than a passing fancy," she smiled, suddenly nostalgic. "I wouldn't push him away, if I were you. They don't make too many men like him, you know."

Miriam laughed, thinking about the lecherous grin.

The next afternoon Miriam and Vargo encountered Ben again, just as Vargo had predicted. He sat waiting for them in the park, next to their favorite crystal fountain.

Ben got right to the point. "May I take the two of you to lunch? I know of a great little restaurant you'll love."

Vargo smiled, and replied, "Not me. I'm already spoken for. Why not take Miriam?"

Miriam laughed. "I appear to be cornered between a lecher and a matchmaker."

"Does that mean yes?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Yes," smiled Miriam.

"When would you like to go?" he asked hesitantly.

"Right now," Vargo replied. "I'm leaving. You two enjoy yourselves, and keep out of trouble." She waved as she rose and walked away. She knew this young man was good for Miriam.

Ben was taken aback by his rapid progress. He'd thought it would be a long campaign. He led Miriam to his favorite cafe, and they chatted along the way.

Miriam was surprised too. She liked Ben, and felt an intrinsic trust for him, but. . . .

During lunch they chatted about unimportant things, getting to know each other's likes and tastes. During dessert, Ben stopped the conversation with a slight wave of his hand.

Leaning toward Miriam, he confided, "I'm not really an old lecher, you know, or a fool. That's just a front to lighten my mood. You see, I'm a soldier, and my life is normally not very pleasant, so I act the fool just to balance things."

Miriam smiled inwardly, and asked innocently, "Do you mean you don't really have 2,000 illegitimate children?"

Ben laughed heartily. "God forbid, I've none. In fact, I'm quite chaste." He saw Miriam blush, and said, "Oh, not by design, but by temperament. I take personal relationships very seriously, and in this I'm not being the fool."

"I know," Miriam murmured. "I know." She wasn't really sure what to think, for she had never met a man like Ben. It was a little unnerving. Having no experience with men, she didn't know what to expect next.

The two had lunch together regularly for the next few days, and Miriam divided her time between Ben and Vargo. Vargo seemed happy to have Miriam spend time with Ben, and more than once she shooed her out of her cabin, saying, "go see your young man."

Miriam enjoyed her lunches with Ben, and she learned a great deal about him. Not the conventional things, like what he did for a living or his assignments, but about him, his tastes, feelings, and inner makeup.

She grew aware that she really liked Ben. They had a lot in common, and both enjoyed simple pleasures. She couldn't define her feelings, but while most of her leaned towards Ben's warm companionship, a small part nagged at her, made her feel sad and nervous around him whenever he looked at her intently.

Finally, one day, Ben asked Miriam to come to his stateroom. "I have something I want to show you, Miriam." He leaned across the table and took her hand. "This is very important to me. Please come to my room with me, now." Miriam was a little puzzled. As well as she'd become acquainted with this handsome Odomak, she was uncomfortable about entering the Odomak compound.

After considering the proposal for a moment, she decided to accept. At least this way she could find out if this seemingly sincere and charming man was legitimate. Besides, she trusted him. She knew he would bring her no harm.

"Yes I will go with you, but only if you will guarantee that you will personally see me back to my quarters." She wanted no repeat of her last encounter with Odomak security.

Ben was mystified by this strange request, but readily agreed. They made their way to the Odomak compound and Ben led her directly to his quarters. The usual horde of security personnel were everywhere, although the two weren't interrupted. It was obvious to

Miriam that Ben Condon swung some official weight, for nobody even dared to look surprised at seeing an off-breed in their complex.

Ben's apartment was quite nice. It had a living room, study, bath, bedroom, and kitchen. Ben asked Miriam to wait in the living room, and went into his study to get something.

He returned with a beautiful ceramic vase.

He easily pulled up another of the heavy chairs in front of Miriam and sat on it, showing her the fragile object. The thin vase, she noted, seemed to be of all colors and of no color, opaque and translucent at the same time. Several tiny, brilliantly colored flowers protruded from the top, although Miriam couldn't say just what colors they were.

"This, Miriam, is my greatest and fondest possession. This vase was crafted by my mother many years ago, before I was born. These flowers were a gift to her by a winged faerie from Nesziah, the single moon circling your home world, Mesziah."

He gingerly handed her the vase, and she carefully turned it around to examine it closely. She noted the superb workmanship and the carefully etched designs, which were almost invisible because of the strange material. It seemed almost mystical in appearance and feel. The material itself, thin as an egg shell, was indefinable.

Most striking were the tiny delicate flowers with fern-like leaves. They were definitely alive, as though they thrived on air alone, and they gave Miriam the haunting feeling of being intellectually aware, as though they were reaching out to her mind.

Somewhere in the night of her deepest inner mind a small light barely shone, almost as a primitive wax candle about to go out in the darkness . . . it brightened just a little. . . .

Looking intently at the hunched-up girl, Ben asked, "What do you think of them?" He searched Miriam's eyes for something . . . unknown.

Miriam looked and looked at the delicate flowers, seeing them, yet seemingly also looking right through them into some unknown world that drew her.

The candle burned brighter, its small flame coming slowly to life. . . .

"I don't know what to say," she whispered with an effort. "But I . . . I don't know. They are so sensitive. Both this vase and these lovely. . . ." Her whisper trailed off.

"You've been badly hurt." Ben spoke softly, gently taking the vase from her fingers. "You've suffered a tragedy beyond my comprehension."

Miriam was suddenly aware of where she was. She shook her head to clear it. "What makes you say that?"

She looked at her hands, seeing that she no longer held the lovely little vase.

"The flowers tell me," he said. "See how they've nearly lost their color? As if they are in mourning. . . ." He paused a moment, then cleared his throat. "The last time this happened to them was when we discovered that my mother had been taken prisoner by the black ones."

Miriam's eyes widened imperceptibly.

Ben shifted his chair again, so he was sitting next to her. He slowly turned the vase around in his fingers. Then, as if from far away, he spoke.

"I'm told that each of these little flowers contains the soul of a faerie, and they can see into the very being of another person. They mourn for you, although I can't guess why."

With this, he excused himself and returned the vase to his study. When he returned, he held two glasses and a thin flask of colorless liqueur.

"This should cheer us," he said. "Then we can go either to your stateroom or back to the park." Ben was greatly disturbed over the incident with the flowers, but he was determined not to show it, and instead poured the clear liqueur. "Anyway, I'm glad you met my faerie flowers. I know now that I have really serious feelings about you."

Miriam listened quietly, having no desire to talk at all. With an effort, she made herself speak.

"I am sorry that I am so quiet. I understand what you have said, and I want to know you better. But now I have some serious thinking of my own to do."

Without warning, Ben reached over and pulled Miriam tenderly to him. His lips brushed hers, then, he kissed her more fully. Miriam started.

He pulled back a little. "I don't know why I am doing this," he whispered, "but it is a compulsion I can't . . . no, I don't want to control." Then he released her slowly, saying, "I think we'd better go now."

Ben realized he'd startled her, so he continued on gently. "We can take a little walk in the park before I take you home, all right?"

Miriam was still a little dazed, but she agreed, and they left the apartment. She was unwilling to let herself think about what had just happened, and to Ben she seemed too fascinated with her surroundings.

They parted early. Miriam went directly to her bedroom and lay down for awhile to think. As she reflected on the day's events, she still found it difficult to believe. She had never been touched, much less kissed, by any man in her conscious life. What's more, she liked it. It was more than just liking . . . it bordered on needing.

The flame burned steadily, no longer in danger of extinguishing.

Yet somehow she was uneasy, but didn't know why. Turning onto her side, Miriam mused that she was just nervous about dealing with a man.

Miriam kept to herself for the rest of the day, and didn't see Vargo. Vargo never inquired into Miriam's private life or thoughts. In fact, she enjoyed seeing Miriam and Ben together, since it reminded her of being with loving and passionate men during times now long past. Besides, the two got on well together.

Vargo felt the man was good for Miriam, so she left them alone most of the time, except when Ben insisted she join them. There were already too many complications in their lives.

When Miriam saw Ben next, two weeks had passed. During the interim she'd spent many hours with Vargo, visiting attractions at the parks and trying not to think too much about her growing attraction to Ben. She missed him and wondered where he was. Vargo didn't discuss him with her.

After two long weeks, she found him sitting alone next to the crystal fountain. He explained that he'd been engaged in a training seminar. Otherwise, he mentioned nothing further about his profession, and she didn't ask. What either of them did for a living didn't matter to the other.

Miriam was happy to see Ben again, in a warm way. She had missed his friendly company and wry humor. She knew someday they would have to part whenever he or she left the Greenstar, and knew she would miss him greatly. But first she wanted a chance to know him better than she already did, and she was relieved when he returned to her.

She mused about what an odd pair they made. Ben was stocky in build, about two meters tall, and immensely strong, although he was always gentle with her. She stood looking at him for a few moments before she went to him at the fountain, smiling at his homely face and odd, lopsided, charming grin. Next to him, she was dwarfed.

One thing changed between them. Ben held Miriam's hand, put his arm around her shoulders, and patted her bottom at every opportunity, as though he was afraid that if he didn't she would disappear forever. Whenever they were alone or out of sight of the public, he kissed and embraced her, all the while making light of it with his charming dialogues. Miriam was at first slightly reluctant during these embraces, but quickly grew to enjoy them.

After they'd spent a few hours together one morning, they found a tree to sit under. Miriam sat leaning against Ben, and when she fell silent, he began to kiss her slowly. She relaxed, enjoying it, as Ben slipped his hand underneath her blouse and gently, but firmly, began caressing her breasts.

Miriam's eyes widened, although her body felt like it was going to melt. She was surprised, not because of his hand, but because she enjoyed it so much. A wonderful sensation, almost electric, coursed from her nipples to her genitals, and her body tingled.

"My God!" she gasped. "Do you know what you are doing to me?"

Ben abruptly stiffened, and still holding her, withdrew his hand. "I'm sorry if I offended . . ." he began.

"What do you mean, offend?" she huffed. "Do you intend to lay me, or just torture me?"

Ben was speechless, but quickly found his voice. He touched her chin, and made her face him. Looking deeply into her eyes, he whispered, "would you sleep with me?"

"If we do not, I will never speak to you again," Miriam responded firmly. She had never felt this way before in her life, so alive, and, yes, vibrant. She wanted Ben now, like nothing she had

ever wanted before. The need was almost frightening in its intensity.

Ben stood up, and taking her hand, led her to the Odomak compound.

Once in his apartment, Ben, still holding her hand, led her to his bedroom and over to the double bed. Then he turned and looked at her.

Miriam looked deeply into his eyes and felt as if she was melting and drowning in them, both at the same time. She had never felt sensations as strong and frightening as these before. Suddenly, nothing mattered but her need for him. The rest of the galaxy no longer existed.

Ben slowly ran his hands up her arms and settled them on her shoulders, then leaned down and kissed her. Miriam felt her body tingling and she rested it against him, aware there was no turning back now. She kissed him passionately, running her long fingers along the back of his neck.

After what seemed like an eternity that lasted for too short a time, Ben pulled back and began to unbutton the blousy top of her shift, planting small kisses on her face, throat, and breasts as he worked the buttons. Miriam felt her body arch up towards him, and her arms found them wrapped around his massive shoulders.

Ben finished with the buttons, and lowered the loose shift over her shoulders so it fell to the floor. Then he knelt down and slipped her panties off, all the while kissing and nibbling her stomach and below.

Miriam felt herself begin to perspire, while he seemed to take an eternity to finish undressing her. The feel of his lips and fingers touching her soft skin sent tingling flashes of heat coursing through her entire body. Then he pulled away, and she opened her eyes and looked at him again.

Ben had stepped back a little and began to unzip his jumpsuit. Miriam reached out and began to pull the zipper, and was amazed to see the golden red hair on his broad chest. She ran her hands over his skin and softly rubbed her cheek against his curly hair, and dimly heard him moan. She was breathing heavily as she lowered her hands to undo his belt, but was unable to unclasp it.

He tilted her head up, and she swam in his eyes, which seemed incredibly deep and knowing. Then kissing her, he reached down

and undid the belt himself, and then quickly pulled off his boots and jumpsuit, dropping them.

Ben eased her down onto the bed and lay pressed against her soft skin, caressing her thighs while hungrily kissing and nibbling her face and neck. She moaned and ran her fingers over his back and along his spine while moving her pelvis rhythmically against his thigh.

Miriam lay snuggled in the crook of his arm afterwards, feeling comfortable and warm. At first he had used his hand and fingers to ease her tension, then had patiently worked with her to effect entry. It had hurt at first, but she became used to the new sensations after a short time and began to enjoy them more and more as the two moved slowly together. She needed him so badly that she couldn't withhold anything from him. Now, she knew that Ben meant more to her than she could ever have guessed.

*The solitary candle flickered steadily in the darkness,
casting shadows from things unseen. . . .*

The next few months were the most memorable she would have during the rest of her life. Ben couldn't keep his hands off of her, but even if he'd been able to, she couldn't keep her hands off of him. She wanted to be with him at every moment and to know every part of him. It was as though centuries of pent-up loneliness and frustrations had surfaced in one climatic moment of time.

Only one incident clouded, or in a small way, saddened Ben's feelings. After they had first made love, and Miriam had been snuggled next to him, he first noticed the crude markings of the Borgdragon tattoo on her right forearm. He understood what it was, and looked at it for a long time. Nothing was said, and he asked no questions. He simply slipped his arms around her and rocked her gently, wishing there was some way to erase the tragedy. After that, there was a kind of sadness in his eyes, and Miriam could never fathom it. It was something deep and mysterious, something which dealt with her, and yet did not.

They spent many happy hours together, playing and exploring each other, just reveling in each other and their happiness.

One day, some 22 months after they had met, Ben stopped Miriam and looked at her for a few moments, then led her to a grassy spot under a leafy tree. Ben took her small hand in his.

"Miriam, I'm leaving the ship tomorrow. I can't tell you why, and that I'm telling you at all is a breach of security." He paused for a few moments, then, said, "But herein I can't help myself. . . ."

Then he shook his head as if to clear it, and looked at her. "I love you very much, Miriam. I don't know if we'll ever meet again, but I want you to know I love you."

She smiled sadly to herself. She too knew this wonderful experience would end all too soon. Now was the time. Neither of them had fooled themselves about the matter or harbored any illusions about changing things.

They talked for awhile, then kissed and parted. It was easier that way. Miriam was sad the interlude was at an end, but she was also very happy that she'd shared this time with Ben.

The next morning, at exactly 06:30, Vargo woke Miriam from a troubled sleep. "Your vacation is at an end, my sweet child," she said in a husky voice. "You'll be leaving this vessel at 07:00 hours on a special mission with the Odomak pathfinder team."

Miriam shook her head, trying to wake up. "What am I supposed to do with regard to this pathfinder team?" she asked, realizing she had no training.

"Not you, but them," Vargo replied. "They will take you to a given location. At that point, and from then on, you will know what to do." Vargo paused for a long moment, and with a sad look in her eyes, added, "your chance of survival will be one in a thousand. Your part in this vital mission is tantamount to suicide."

Miriam's thoughts raced. Certainly without any training she'd be committing suicide. Why would the sisterhood have so little regard for her life?

Then she was suddenly reminded of Ruby, who with tragedy written all over her face, told her of the millions of sisters who had given their lives to fight the black ones.

And Miriam knew this mission, whatever it was, dealt with the black ones. The sisterhood must know what they were doing or they wouldn't be sending her. For some reason she was right for the job, and this was why she'd been locked away for three years; she'd been hidden from the prying eyes of the black ones. And this vacation was it a last gift to a doomed sister?

Miriam was glad she'd come to know Ben, and Vargo. She was glad she'd lived in peace these many months.

Now she was ready for whatever might come.

She shook her head again, this time in resignation and understanding. Then she got up and dressed in her black Nashramh uniform.

Vargo took her directly to the Odomak embarkation port by a special tube way. The trip took only ten minutes, ten very short minutes. When they arrived, the pathfinder team was preparing to board a small shuttle transport.

As they stepped into the port, all the members of the team looked in their direction. Vargo signaled Sister Manya Turen, the sisterhood representative on the team, to join her, and Manya left her position with the team to do so. Then Vargo approached the pathfinder team leader, Major Vaughn Nelbrine, and introduced Miriam to him.

Suddenly the entire compartment fell silent. The Odomaks stood in silence, foremost among them Captain Ben Condon.

Vargo ignored them. "This is Sister-Lieutenant Miriam B'Mesziah, who will implement phase two of this operation," she stated with authority. "She has been selected by our Council Central for this task and has our complete confidence."

With this, and without a word to Miriam, she saluted the team, turned on her heel, and left, accompanied by Sister Manya.

The first to break the loud silence was Cherette Voss, Ben Condon's partner. Her grey eyes narrowed. "Why weren't we informed of your involvement before now? Have you been spying on us?"

The shock of seeing Ben in this group was still wearing off. Miriam faced the six astonished Odomaks and addressed them. "I can tell you only what I have been told. First, I learned of this assignment only 25 minutes ago, which is consistent with Nashramh policy of complete security for special projects. Second, I know nothing of the mission, or of its destination. I only know you are to escort me to a given location and that I will know what to do when we arrive there. Third, I have been told I have one chance in 1,000 of surviving this mission."

Ben's bushy eyebrows raised and he stood still, his head reeling in wonderment of her devotion to this sisterhood that would send her to certain death.

Miriam continued without stopping. "As to the question of spying, the answer is no. If any of you feel I should not be included in this mission, then so speak up and have me removed."

With that, she stepped back and remained silent.

Syd Haupt, the team navigator, asked, "Do you mean to say that you have no idea of what this entire affair is about?"

Ben Condon spoke out above the others, "belay this line of questioning. Lieutenant B'Meszhiah is neither a spy nor a plant." He stepped forward and motioned for Miriam to do the same. "I think we can clear this up without any further discussion. Miriam, would you please roll up your right sleeve.

Miriam didn't want to do this. She looked at him for a few seconds, and noticed the other Odomaks staring at her. She felt self-conscious about the Borgdragon tattoo, but she realized the order was important. Slowly, she complied, exposing the ugly tattoo.

Watching her, Ben knew that she was hesitant to show her secret. He understood why. But, damn it, this was too important.

He sighed with relief when she rolled up her sleeve. Then he went on. "I think this tells us who and what the lieutenant is."

The other Odomaks were visibly concerned by the tattoo, and realized its implications. Cherette Voss spoke up.

"Well, I'm convinced. Let's scuttle this discussion and get going."

Major Nelbrine smiled inwardly, and said softly to himself, "well, we got over that hurdle easily enough. Now the real fun begins."

The team, now prepared for their upcoming mission, boarded their shuttle, and waited. At 07:35, the G.C.C. Greenstar broke into temporal space, ejected the shuttlecraft, and dropped back into the sub-binary.

The entire operation took 12 minutes. Then the craft waited motionless for three hours before the Odomak deception freighter, 'Dristogborn', broke into temporal space to retrieve it.

In the meantime, Ben introduced the pathfinders to Miriam. "Our pathfinder teams are always composed of binary units consisting of male and female components. We've found, from long experience, this arrangement is the most efficient for both short and long-term missions. As you can see, there are six of us.

He continued, pointing to each member. "There is myself and my partner Lieutenant Cherette Voss, our team leader Major Vaughn Nelbrine and his partner Sergeant-Navigator Syd Haupt, and Medic-Sergeant Ham Ordin and Lieutenant Karina Long." Ben

paused a moment, rubbing his chin in a nervous gesture. "It will be our job to get you safely to your destination and to get you out alive if we can."

They made small talk until the Dristogborn retrieved them. When they boarded the Odomak's deception vessel, and after a short rest they briefed Miriam on their methods for coordinated attacks, defense, travel, and general tactics.

The Odomaks were surprised to learn Miriam was already an expert in all phases of their operations and tactics, and she herself, was pleased that she could relate to at least this much of the mission. She had absolutely no idea what her part was to be, but she wanted to make the pathfinder team's part as easy as possible. With this they grew to respect her presence, and she found they could all work smoothly together. These Odomaks didn't harbor the same biases against off-breeds that the Coytels had.

During these exercises, Ben Condon was all business, as if they had never been lovers. Only once, when they were alone, did he kiss her, saying, "I'm sorry you're on this mission, Miriam. I'd rather die a hundred times than see you hurt. We'll do everything we can to get you out again. Just remember that whatever happens, I love you."

Miriam knew now that they were assigned to the same mission they could no longer be intimate. This saddened her, but she'd already resigned herself to losing him when he'd been ordered to leave the Greenstar. She found, however, that they worked well together, especially since each knew how the other thought.

The team spent more than six months on the Dristogborn. They worked on their plans for many hours each day, and spent the rest in whatever recreation they could find. The upcoming mission was a serious one, and the members needed to blow off steam.

As for Miriam, she spent much of her time studying and practicing her Nashramh exercises. She worked out in her cabin because it was private, and the Odomaks respected her privacy. They, themselves, were very private and modest.

Finally the Dristogborn arrived at star system 10862-AA, near the rim, and the team off-loaded from the freighter into temporal space. The Dristogborn continued toward the Spaceliner, 'Interspace Colony', which was an older version of the Starliners Miriam had previously traveled on. This vessel plied its trade

outside of the normal boundaries of the Galactic Common Confederation and the mainstream of interstellar commerce, and because of this, the older model was used.

The Interspace Colony was a liner 200 kilometers-long. She was stationed outside star system 10862AA and would remain there for about four months, exchanging cargo and passengers with 25 nearby systems whose short-range freighters arrived on a scheduled basis. After leaving this spot, the liner would drop into the sub-binary and emerge into temporal space at its next stop about 80,000 light years distant.

Immediately before disembarking from the Dristogborn, Miriam met with vessel's sisterhood representative, an Odomak named Sister Vera Mouse. This sister introduced herself curtly and wished Miriam a safe return, and they chatted over a light wine.

After the short meeting, Miriam joined the rest of the team and together they entered their transfer shuttle and ejected from the Dristogborn two hours before it came into contact with the massive liner.

Miriam watched out a porthole as they ejected and was impressed with the rapidly receding Odomak freighter. Then she sat back to contemplate the next leg of their mission.

She knew the shuttle was to make a five-day sub-binary jump, and emerge into temporal space near the second planet circling the star 10862AA. It would have to land without arousing detection and then camouflage it-self. This would be difficult to do, and Miriam suspected this planet was heavily surveyed by whatever security personnel inhabited it. She also knew the Odomaks were experienced in this maneuver. Landing on the planet would be simple compared to getting back off again.

Chapter 15

Mission

Phodden Morg was a desolate and primitive world on which cunning and stealth was a prerequisite for survival. Its natives may have been incorporated into Samael's Legions of Light and other slave organizations, but they hadn't lost their natural toughness and fighting abilities . . . and Miriam was soon to find that no matter how well trained you are, fate . . . or just bad luck, can rule the day.

09:30-17 SHABIN 6720-6N5

Miriam sat next to Ben at the worktable, poring over a map of Phodden Morg. The planet was outside normal trade channels, which made it even more difficult to land undetected.

Phodden Morg's population was crude and superstitious, forming an industrial society that produced different varieties of complex metal alloys. The planet's technological state and industries were far superior to what the primitive natives could produce. Obviously outside interests were at work there, exploiting the ore rich world and its humble populace for profit. Miriam suspected the people were Sargon's Portrog and Mertrog slaves.

In the afternoon of their sixth day in the sub-binary, the shuttle broke into temporal space at a predetermined point between the planet and its parent sun. This maneuver was designed to take advantage of the interplay between the distant sun's intense radiation output and the electromagnetic field surrounding the large planet. The shuttle, which was shaped like an ellipsoid disc,

used these energies with its own limited cloaking system and dropped straight down toward Phodden Morg's dusty surface.

The shuttle's protective screens easily offset the atmospheric friction and other planetary forces, allowing it to land within a few meters of the desert world's surface without detection.

The Odomak vessel was designed for limited temporal and sub-binary travel and emergency descent onto the surfaces of most standard types of planets, but unfortunately didn't have the power supply or drive required for takeoff, since its drives were sub-binary reactors that lacked the high thrust characteristics of temporal impulse drives. The crew would have to camouflage it well, because it would remain on the planet's surface indefinitely, and must not be found by the enemy until the mission was completed.

In the ship's command center, everyone strapped themselves in for a possible rocky landing. The activated view-screen showed the huge dreary planet of Phodden Morg looming ominously, looking almost like a dead, orange sun itself. It was a cold desert world, lacking both oceans and rainfall, and whatever water there was came from underground springs. The population imported water in trade for alloys.

Miriam watched as the planet loomed ever closer. The cloud cover was thick and dense, so all she could see was a dull orange-grey mistiness that hid everything else.

Generally the climate was turbulent and cold, and without warning, huge dust storms formed and raged for days at a time. The team was landing during the season when these storms weren't prevalent.

The vessel began to quiver from increased gravitational attraction, and descended faster. Major Nelbrine activated the ship's protective shields to maximum. Suddenly, they were plunging down through thick clouds of dust and loose moisture.

Then, just as quickly, they broke through the clouds, flying smoothly above the orange-grey surface of Phodden Morg. The landscape was drab and expansive.

The automatic guidance system brought the ship down at the predetermined coordinates at the base of a large rolling dune. Immediately, high-pressure jet nozzles at the rim of the vessel's disc and at its base forced atmospheric gases under the craft, rocking it into a crater of its own making. Then the jet nozzles

directed the dust and residue up and over the craft, covering it completely.

After about 20 minutes, the entire area covering the ship blended completely with the surrounding dunes and was indistinguishable from the rest of the desert. The vessel itself was buried several meters below the surface, difficult to detect by most equipment.

The assault team prepared for the mission, reaffirming their assignments. Ben and Cherette would remain aboard the submerged ship and keep their communications open for further orders. They would leave only when the others completed their mission and returned to the Dristogborn.

The other five made up the assault team. If their mission was successful, they would afterwards reach one of several small spaceports and escape.

Immediately upon landing, the team dismantled the sub-binary drive and destroyed it along with all other systems excepting the ship's reactor and primary communications equipment. These too would be destroyed later, but only when Ben and Cherette abandoned the ship.

Miriam and the others donned their environmental uniforms, cruder versions than the one she had worn at Borgdragon. All seven needed to wear atmospheric rectifiers, since the planet's atmosphere was badly polluted from industrial wastes, and would otherwise hinder them. Each team member also wore a backpack containing a blending cloak for later use, and an emergency supply of water and energy tablets.

Miriam's backpack was a little bigger than the others. It contained special equipment she would need later, as well as the cloak and water.

Each pathfinder carried 35 energy tablets and a pouch of water. They had for several days been on this special diet of water and energy tablets, and would continue it throughout the projected eight-day mission.

As they prepared, the team members chatted, trying to keep the subdued atmosphere as light as possible. Eventually tension overcame them and they soon fell silent. They continued to quietly check each other's uniforms for flaws and safety problems.

Finally the time came for the five to leave. Major Nelbrine pried open the upper airlock and began digging into the packed sand. He

tunneled his way upward, his partner Syd Haupt pushing an extension climbing pole past him. Miriam traveled between them and the team of Ham Ordin and Karina Long.

Miriam started to climb up the small ladder that led to the airlock, but Ben caught her hand and squeezed it, whispering, "I love you."

"I love you," Miriam whispered back, and they looked into each other's eyes for short seconds before parting.

"Good hunting," Miriam said to Ben with the Nashramh's ancient wish for good luck.

It took the assault team about 30 minutes to reach the surface. The going was slow since they had to push the dislodged sand behind them and tunnel upwards. Miriam felt the narrow walls of the dark tunnel closing in on her, and after a few moments stopped, panting slightly. Then she took three deep breaths, set her shoulders, and continued upwards before Ham, who came behind her, could ask what was wrong.

At last they emerged from the claustrophobic tunnel into the open, bleak desert. Miriam looked around at the dreary landscape of dull tan rolling dunes which she knew covered much of the planet. It was a god-forsaken place, looking more like the bare bones of a wasted world. The gases that filtered in through her atmosphere rectifier were sour and stagnant.

Major Nelbrine stretched his cramped muscles, and the others followed suit. Miriam fancied she could hear their joints crackling. Then he turned, and with Ham's help, quickly covered their tunnel with loose sand. Soon the whole area appeared undisturbed.

They began walking towards the south 20 minutes after Ham Ordin moved ahead as the scout. The team kept in a close formation, each scanning in all directions for enemy activity with eyes soon tired from the brightness of the cold white sun.

They made their way south, toward the beginnings of a high, desolate mountain range known as the *Theath of Sargon*. After they arrived at that site, Major Nelbrine planned to go another 40 kilometers to the southwest through a series of rugged passes until they reached the target, a mountain three kilometers-high. There Miriam would begin her phase of the operation.

The Odomaks exercised every precaution crossing the 50 kilometers over the dune sea. They moved silently, and their

uniforms did a fairly good job of blending in with the tannish-grey sand.

At long last they reached their first target, a huge jutting outcrop of jagged rock which opened onto the high black mountain range. They had spent two uneasy days and nights out in the open trying to avoid patrols and high-flying aircraft.

Ham Ordin already stood in the shadows at the outcrop when the four others arrived. Miriam appraised the huge talon-shaped rock, which seemed to serve as a warning to unwary travelers. Well, they were wary enough.

Ordin signaled all was well. They approached quickly and met him to plan the next leg of the operation. Far behind the huge outcrop rose the black, mineral-rich Mountains called the *Theath of Sargon*. They would make directly for these.

Miriam plopped down with a dull thud, exhausted. In excellent physical condition, she'd kept up admirably, but she wasn't as big as the pathfinder's. Besides, the Odomaks had longer legs, so it took her nearly two steps compared to their one.

She sat panting for a few moments, watching Major Nelbrine gesturing to Syd and Ham, and sipped at the remnants of her water with a tube inside her suit. Then, groaning at the soreness of her muscles, she refilled her pouch with one more liter of bland water from her pack.

The team discussed their plans quietly in whispers. Major Nelbrine decided they couldn't afford to make any stops longer than a few moments at a time, since they were heading into a well-patrolled and dangerous terrain. The barren rock cliffs and empty passes afforded little cover from attack, while the natives hunted and ambushed whatever they could find, since they were rewarded handsomely for each uneaten head they delivered to the security patrols. Miriam winced at the thought, remembering the natives at Borgdragon had also done this. There were also military patrols all over the area, and the pathfinders had already encountered dozens of security surveillance aircraft criss-crossing the skies over the desert. Many more would fly over these exposed areas.

All five unrolled their camouflage cloaks and pulled the loose-fitting garments on. Her cloak was a dark color, like their atmospheric uniforms, but blended in more easily with the surrounding tannish and black stone. Miriam noted it wasn't as

effective as those the sisterhood used, but was perfect for this particular terrain.

After a short rest of 30 minutes, they took their energy tablets and then began to move again. Ham Ordin had already left 20 minutes earlier to scout the terrain.

The climb up the long, winding canyon was slow, and Miriam's breath came in painful puffs and gasps. Major Nelbrine and Syd Haupt moved in front of her and Karina behind her. They had to go single file in many places because of obstacles.

After they moved ten kilometers, they came upon Ham in a narrow ravine. Because of his cloaking uniform he was invisible until they were on top of him. Miriam just stumbled along with the team, and was glad for the rest.

"I've just checked this one out," Ham whispered. "It's a dangerous way, but will cut at least two hours off our time. It's narrow and cluttered with debris, but opens onto the same flat plain we must eventually cross."

Major Nelbrine considered the situation, his eyes narrowing, and then decided to chance it. Time and exposure were their worst enemies. "You remain with us this time, Ham. Karina will act as scout."

Karina nodded curtly and left. Ham sat down with the others, since she would need at least 20 minutes to get a lead on the group.

Miriam sipped at her stale water, wishing fervently that she could shower. She felt dirty inside the airtight uniform, and her long hair, which was pulled back into a long, tight braid inside the headgear, felt oily. The water tasted stale, but it moistened her parched throat. After she finished, she leaned back against the ravine wall and closed her eyes. Now she was beginning to hate tans and browns, and the small sun, which gave off little heat, seemed to reflect its cold light from the sand and dust and embedded itself into her eyes and mind.

After 20 minutes, the team moved on again. Miriam moved sluggishly, weak from her effort to keep up with the Odomaks. The trip through the winding ravine was extremely difficult and tiring, since it required a great deal of climbing over broken boulders and through tight channels. If Miriam hadn't been so tired, she would have laughed, for when the Odomaks easily scaled boulders she

had to struggle over them, and when they had trouble squeezing through small channels, she slipped through.

However much trouble, the ravine cut over two hours off their planned schedule. They stopped at the ravine's end for a few moments, and Miriam stood still, surveying the flat, dark plain ahead of them. It was about seven kilometers-long, and bordered on the east by large, rocky cliffs. They planned to move to the base of these cliffs, which would afford them cover in the late afternoon shadows. Their scout, Karina, was nowhere in sight, but Miriam knew that trying to locate her would be futile, since her cloak would blend easily with the cliff wall.

After a short rest, the team moved stealthily along the east wall, finding the footing easier and faster than the shifting sands of the desert and the obstacle-filled ravine had been. This was a flat, dry plain, with only sparse growth that survived not because of rain, which was virtually nonexistent, but because of small underground springs. Everything, from the grey tufts of brittle grass to the few creeping bark-like plants, were withered and dry, almost dead. Miriam could see no signs of animal life, and only a few insects.

Carefully surveying the flat terrain along the base of the rocky cliffs, Nadig Cado sensed, rather than saw, the movements of several bodies in the deep shadows. This was his terrain; he knew it well, and missed nothing.

There were two or three, but it was difficult to tell for sure, since he couldn't quite hear them. A party of three was a rare thing at that, and he smirked at the thought of the rewards his troop would get for their heads. He would have to work fast, since the party was heading straight for the death ring. He would have to dispatch them before they got there.

His mind went back to when the death ring had first been activated, several years ago. Hunting once had been good and plentiful, but now it was hard, because most of the prey managed to get inside the death ring before it could be dispatched. Unfortunately, Nadig's troop couldn't follow the prey in or they too would die, from the deadly ground. Damn ring.

Nadig scratched his oily hair, musing that these bodies could be from Agtren lead mine number six, or . . . something else. It seemed to him that it was the latter, since their stealth was

considerable, almost practiced. He'd led his troop of the faithful for some 20 years now, and never encountered anyone as quiet as these approaching things.

He passed on the signal for ambush, motioning Quek Corr, his second, to a backup position three meters to his left. His troop, numbering 11 including himself, were experienced in trapping these runaway slaves who were usually unbelievers or heretics who defied Sweet Sargon.

Somehow, these fast approaching creatures were different from slaves. Nadig braced himself against a low rocky protrusion and sighted his laser rifle in the direction of the intruders.

They moved along carefully and in silence, making good time. The dark shadows projected by the enormous cliffs lengthened and the cold, white sun sank on the horizon. Miriam's feet hurt, and her muscles and joints ached, but she plodded along steadily, happy for the even ground.

Suddenly, Syd Haupt pitched forward with a gaping hole in her chest. Miriam dropped to the ground and carefully looked to see where the silent shot had come from. She wondered who could have seen them, but her thoughts were abruptly shut off when she heard a scream, and saw a small, wiry biped spin away from the cliff to the left and ahead of her, its arm shot off.

Miriam heard sizzling impacts on the ground around her, and realized the shots were from laser rifles which made no sound. She turned her head to see the action, and watched as eight other natives broke cover from the base of the cliff that curved some 20 meters in front of the ambushed team. They began firing at the other members of her assault team.

She slowly reached her hand down along her side, trying not to make her motions too obvious so they would give her away. Then she froze.

Right next to her, Ham Ordin, who lay by the wall, was hit in the side. By absolute self-discipline he didn't move from his firing position, although he bled profusely from a gaping wound in his side. He carefully picked off four of the attackers before receiving a second hit in the chest from someone hidden in the shadows.

In the meantime, Major Nelbrine leaped to Miriam's right side, dispatching two of the unknown attackers before he too was cut down by the hidden gunman. Miriam, who lay unmoving, could

now see where the shots came from, but couldn't get a clear shot at the assailant.

The two creatures, that had re-hidden themselves behind the boulder from which they had come from, were killed by someone further along the cliff face; Karina heard the sharp whines of the Odomak's weapons and returned to her embattled companions. By killing the two from behind she'd surprised the hidden gunman, and he turned to fire at her.

Miriam immediately made for the spot, and killed the gunman, burning his head off with her first shot. She pulled her pistol out so quickly that she didn't even remember doing it. She heard a faint scuffle, and spinning around, spotted another wiry figure three meters away and dispatched it with her second shot. Then she crouched in the shadows, listening. She could hear only the wind, which, as dusk began to fall, began to howl and blow in gusts.

Carefully looking around, Miriam saw a movement and a tactical signal 20 meters away, and returned the signal the Odomaks had taught her. Then both she and Karina, for Karina it was, met and slowly scoured the area for more enemies. All were dead, as were their three companions.

Karina blinked back angry tears when she saw her fallen comrades, and one part of her accused herself for not having seen the ambush point before the team arrived. But she straightened her shoulders, her training reminding her that the attackers might not have been there when she passed a half an hour earlier. If they had, well this was their terrain and they were much more familiar with it than she. But, it was a damn shame!

Miriam stood next to her, and both surveyed the bodies. Then Karina was surprised when Miriam stepped forward to the nearest of them, Ham Ordin. She saw Miriam keel down next to him, and after removing his atmospheric rectifier and her own, either breathe into his mouth or kiss him. Then with a sudden irrational hope, Karina thought Ham might get up and cheerfully say, "well, let's get a move on!" But he didn't, and his flat face remained absently dead.

Miriam repeated the same action with Major Nelbrine and Syd Haupt.

When Miriam stood surveying the dead, a strange sadness welled up in her. But more strongly, she had felt an urge to kiss

each one on the lips. As she had done so with each, she heard an almost inaudible schnick. When she had finished, she replaced her own atmosphere rectifier and removed the water pouch and energy tablets from the three. She carried these to Karina, and they both refilled their own pouches and stored the rest in Miriam's pack.

In complete silence, Miriam and Karina managed to drag all 14 bodies to the side of the cliff, and after laying them side by side, covered them with loose rocks and sand. Miriam turned to go, but Karina looked up into the sky and hastily, but inaudibly murmured a prayer. Then she motioned to Miriam that they should leave.

Fortunately, during the exchange and burial procedure no aircraft passed overhead. If any did now, hopefully they would see nothing strange through the shallow soil of the long mound that lay hidden in the dark shadows of the cliff wall. Only if someone heard the exchanges as Karina had, or by some chance stumbled upon the mound, would they be pursued and searched for.

Miriam and Karina covered the remaining 30 kilometers without mishap. They made only short stops for rest during the trek, and neither spoke along the way. They couldn't afford to dwell on the bad luck of the battle, for in this way lay fear and possible failure. Instead, Miriam scrutinized the land ahead for any signs of recognizable memory triggers, while Karina kept a sharp look-out for another ambush.

After a few hours they finally reached their destination, a secluded, boulder-filled area. Miriam plopped down immediately to rest, and concentrated on sipping her stale water. As the water soothed her parched throat, she looked up in front of her. Then she jumped to her feet in complete surprise.

About 200 meters in front of her was a high black cliff. She estimated its height to be about three kilometers. High atop it she could see the spires of a huge black city, similar to the one at Borgdragon. The white sun, which was now setting, sent prisms of color through the gleaming towers.

As soon as she saw it, her mind began to click and whirl much faster than usual, and suddenly, Miriam consciously knew what her mission was. Now she knew why she had been in complete isolation for three years back at Heline's academy. All the trances she couldn't clearly remember had been ethereal dream-trance training, in which she'd learned everything she needed to know

about the mission. This sight, at this particular angle, was the trigger that opened her mind to all of the memories and training she would now need to complete the mission.

Miriam and Karina stood before one of Gensargon's two smaller fortresses, Samael-Agtren. The citadel was buried deep in the bowels of the huge, mineral-rich black mountain, and on top of the upper deck was built another luxury city.

Miriam knew this next leg of the mission was hers alone. She was to be the deadly instrument that would initiate the destruction of Samael-Agtren!

"Karina, you can go no further than this," she whispered softly. "Do you see that black strip just ahead?"

Karina surveyed the terrain immediately ahead, and noted the glistening black soil crystals had an odd look to them. There were some wind-polished bones about 40 meters away, probably of some animal, and there was no foliage to be seen for a band of at least 200 meters. She nodded.

Miriam quickly briefed Karina on the terrain. "This is part of a 200 meter strip that surrounds the entire mountain. It was placed there just after the black ones learned about the destruction of Samael-Borgdragon. That cliff over there," she pointed, "is the most exposed part of the mountain, and the most easily surveyed. They will not expect an assault there." Then she paused for a long moment and Karina looked at her, surprised, an assault? Impossible!

"I will cross over the strip," Miriam continued in a hushed whisper, "then scale the cliff to a hidden cave entrance. When I return, we'll have to move out fast." She paused again. "You can't come with me now. The problem is the strip is impregnated with an unknown substance that penetrates every known material and is fatal to all living things. If I make it, I doubt I'll live long, but because of my light weight, I'll have the best chance of completing this part of the mission."

Karina frowned at the awesome cliff. "Do you know how long you will be?"

"No, but I am almost certain I should not take over 24 hours. Can you hide until then?"

Karina quickly surveyed the rocky enclosure they were now in, and saw a small hollow in the wall area. "Yes."

"Good," Miriam murmured remembering something. She pulled up her face mask and unclipped a chip from one of her teeth. "I want you to take this crystal and give it to the first Nashramh representative you encounter."

Karina accepted the tiny crystal without comment, and pulled up her own mask to insert it on one of her teeth.

Miriam shrugged off her backpack and pulled out a package, which she gave to Karina. Karina opened it and pulled out a grey-looking cloth garment, which she immediately donned. She spied three other unopened packages in the backpack and a wave of sadness engulfed her; they had been meant for her fallen comrades.

Miriam pulled out another cloak for herself, and a pair of thick-soled boots and a belt. Pulling them on, she swung the climbing anchors over her shoulders.

Karina watched her, fascinated, then looked back at her own cloak. She was mystified by the way the thin material blended with everything, much more than the Odomak cloaks. Suddenly, she realized she also felt warmer; the biting cold wind was broken by the strange cloak.

"That cloak will camouflage you well while I am gone." Then without another word, she saluted Karina and turned away. Moving quickly, she cleared the poisoned strip in a matter of minutes and arrived at a familiar-looking feature at the cliff base. Then she located the faint anchor locations and began to climb as fast as she could.

Eleven hundred meters up, Miriam came to a crack in the stone. She immediately wriggled her way into it and found herself in a low dark tunnel. She sat hunched up for a moment, feeling a tingling sensation shoot up her spine. She shivered, feeling something definitely strange in the atmosphere of this place. Just what it was, she couldn't say.

Reaching into her backpack, Miriam pulled out a flash-light and a tiny plastic stick on a chain. She pulled the chain over her head, then, turned on the light. The dull yellow light made a small spot of warmth in the tunnel.

Miriam began to crawl down the narrow space, all the while feeling a growing sense of oppression and unease that gnawed at her empty stomach. She felt coldness in the tunnel which had

nothing to do with temperature, an emptiness that had nothing to do with life. Her shivering became stronger, more violent.

She slowly followed her weak light down the tunnel, which appeared to have been burned in its formation. She crawled about 70 meters until the shiny, glass-like rock ended and sat panting. The air was stale, and its coldness stung her lungs.

For another half meter, the tunnel looked as if it had been hand-chiseled and cut. Miriam wondered who could bear the burden and lonely task of making this long narrow tunnel; she would have felt incredibly closed in after only a few hours. Rubble was pushed up along the sides of the passage and out of the way by the unknown builder. The shallow, cut section ended abruptly at a flat, black surface, a surface that seemed to draw her light into its unfathomable surface without a trace of reflection.

She knew this was the wall protecting Samael-Agtren Fortress. It was built inside the mountain, with the souls and bodies of hundreds of millions of hapless slaves and a dense combination of black, heavy metals. The dark wall seemed to vibrate with its own perverted form of life, and Miriam felt her heart leap into her throat. She wanted to turn and leave this vile, empty, yet horribly alive place.

Calming herself, Miriam located a tiny slot on the wall, and inserted the plastic key into it, immediately a thick door swung silently open, and she crawled through. It closed behind her.

She flashed her light around, which seemed dimmer than before. She was in a closet-sized room which held only a narrow bed beside the opposite wall. She felt a strong compulsion to lie down on it, and crawled over to it. Then she relaxed her body, which was overly tense because of her long trek and her sense of apprehension.

Miriam found it hard to relax in this room, which had an ominous and hostile feeling to it, and, although she didn't know why, a dark suspicion. It had been formed out of the black wall, and no pains were taken to camouflage the sleek black metal of its walls as at Borgdragon. The whole setup bothered her.

Miriam started. She hadn't been aware she'd fallen asleep, since she hadn't dreamed. She felt oddly relaxed. She also had a deep sense of queasiness, somewhat like she had felt when she'd awakened just before leaving Borgdragon. She reached for her flashlight, which lay on her chest, and turned it on.

The door was open, and she now sensed a complete emptiness. She felt alone, as alone as if she floated through empty space. Yet something still felt hostile, and this too bothered her.

Miriam sat up, feeling nauseated, then stooped through the door and crawled back down the tunnel after she locked the door. Locking it, she twisted the key in the slot, and as at Borgdragon, she sensed an ominous rumbling of some hidden destructive force. Something tremendous would happen; it was now just a matter of time.

When she reached the crack at the end of the tunnel, it was dark outside. She carefully and quickly descended the cliff's face by the same means she had scaled it. By the time she reached the bottom, the first rays of the far-off white sun were peeking over the graceful spires of Samael-Agtren. Then, making directly for Karina's hiding spot, Miriam ran across the poison strip and surprised her companion, who had neither seen nor heard her approach.

Miriam immediately began removing her climbing gear. She undid her belt, then, handed the anchor straps to Karina. "Use these to pull the boots off, but do not touch them. They are deadly."

Once all of the gear was off, Miriam pressed a button on the bottom of the belt buckle, and in a few moments it disintegrated into fine powder. Karina watched in wonder.

"We have to get out of here right away," Miriam panted. "I've been poisoned, but I've also done what I came here to do."

Karina asked none of the questions that were on her mind, but picked up her pack and led the way down the path along which they had come. They moved quickly, saying nothing, and passed the ambush site where their comrades were buried. Nothing seemed to be disturbed, and both knew the mound hadn't been discovered. They continued on, pausing only for short breaks.

"I can't feel my toes, and my feet are beginning to tingle and burn," Miriam hurriedly informed her companion. "It is the poison beginning to take effect. As soon as possible we'll have to commandeer some form of transportation, or I won't make it back to the spaceport."

Karina nodded, and they began to move again. Every moment counted and they didn't waste any time.

The next day, they approached the cargo transport road that led from Samael-Agtren's warehouse district to various supply stations, including an import station located at a nearby freight handling spaceport. Traffic on this road consisted of large, lumbering vehicles that traveled slowly along the sandy pavement. Each vehicle was sealed so the driver couldn't get out and no one could get in. They would have to find another way.

Karina came up with the plan. They would wait by the side of the road just before a curve. A vehicle would have to slow down before rounding it. Then they could get on.

A short time later, a large lumbering vehicle slowed as the driver shifted into a lower gear. Karina, with expert dexterity, sprang to her feet, snapped an anchoring device onto the back of the truck and pulled herself up onto a loading step. Miriam, about seven meters down the road, stumbled up behind the vehicle and grasped Karina's outstretched hand. It was risky, but the vehicle was not going fast enough to kill her if she missed. As it was, Karina easily pulled Miriam up onto the step beside her.

Miriam hadn't realized how strong these Odomak women were, for although they were stocky and tall, they didn't appear to be overly strong. Karina easily matched Ben Condon's strength.

The two clung to the back of the vehicle and the supporting anchors for some time, standing on the loading strip. Karina had slung a strap around them and attached it to the anchors. Their cloaks camouflaged them so well, that another large vehicle traveling behind them for ten minutes, apparently didn't notice them. Miriam practically held her breath the whole time, partially because she expected pursuit as soon as the mound with their teammates' bodies was discovered.

The vehicle was, by some good fortune, headed for a supply port only a kilometer away from the Som Morg Spaceport. As the lumbering truck slowed to stop at the depot inspection gate, the two hitchhikers disconnected their anchors and dropped off and blended with the dark grey pavement. Then they scurried to the side of the road.

From this point on, Miriam found out how good the pathfinders were. Within an hour and half, Karina bypassed a dozen security posts and deposited the two at the base of a huge cargo freighter that was obviously preparing for liftoff. There were several roving guard patrols around, but these didn't see them, and the cameras

that usually scanned the entire area had already folded into a vertical position to protect them from blast-off shock.

The vessel was an automated cargo carrier with a small crew located in its forward cabin. Karina located one of maintenance airlocks and was trying to figure out how to bypass the lock when Miriam lurched forward. By now she had lost all sensation below her knees.

Miriam produced two alarm bypasses and activated a hidden switch while Karina watched. Then they entered quickly, still unnoticed, while Miriam activated the alarm bypasses before closing the hatch.

They proceeded through the inner airlock the same way, and once inside, lay down on the deck. Karina wrapped her cloak around her as well as she could. Miriam had explained its unique properties of not only shielding them from view, but also its ability to act as a buffer against certain weapons.

After only ten minutes, the impulse drives of the cargo freighter pounded into rumbling service and the vessel lifted off of Phodden Morg's dusty surface, shifting immediately into the sub-binary once it had cleared the planet's atmosphere. The vessel's destination was the same as all cargo hauls this month; it would rendezvous with the Starliner Supreme G.C.C. 'Interspace Colony' in five days.

Just a few hours after they entered the ship, the paralysis crept up to Miriam's thighs. They'd entered the vessel easily, and now Miriam suspected it had been too simple. Karina explained the pathfinder's training and experience made the chance of this kind of escape about 80 percent successful. They knew about most of the enemy's security systems and how to bypass them. This, combined with bold action, increased their chances of success. Only unanticipated ambushes lessened the success rate of missions, such as on Phodden Morg.

For the next five days, the two lay huddled together in the maintenance shop. They had to keep their atmosphere rectifier headgear on. Although the cabin was regulated at the planet's standard pressure, the stale atmosphere was un-breathable without the face gear. This gear filtered out the gases they could not use while allowing what they needed to pass.

As soon as they felt safe, Miriam began her Shambu exercises to control her breathing, heartbeat, and other bodily functions so

they were reduced to a much slower rate. She spent most of her time in this nearly comatose state, for she hoped that if she slowed her bodily functions the poison wouldn't spread as fast as it would have otherwise, and she might be able to get to the Sisters of Orb.

Several hours into the fifth day, the freighter broke into temporal space. When she felt the impulse reactors begin to beat into operation, Karina shook Miriam until she awakened from her long, controlled sleep. The elf was now completely paralyzed and dying. Karina knew that if she hadn't been in this controlled suspension, she would have died the day they boarded.

The freighter began its docking procedure with the Interspace Colony, and Karina was preparing to leave. By now, Miriam was having trouble breathing and could speak only with great effort. Her soft, dark eyes were glassy behind the large magnifying lens of her headgear.

Karina felt the ship lurch as it came into contact with the spaceliner. She rose, and after stretching her cramped muscles, checked the interior of the liner's huge cargo bay adjoining the freighter. It was as she had suspected, a pressurized bay with mobile robotics loading and unloading the huge cargo containers.

After she returned, she bodily picked the limp form up and carried Miriam over her left shoulder through the open cargo door of the freighter and into the liner's loading bay. The material handling monitoring personnel, working in the bay, didn't notice the camouflaged figure moving through the inspection area, and the security equipment registered nothing. Karina then maneuvered along a network of maintenance corridors to an external bay station common to this series of Starliner. Her years of intensive training paid off handsomely, for she knew exactly where she was going.

Once in the egress station, Karina settled Miriam against a bulkhead and opened a locker next to it. She found only one spacesuit, but it was a large one.

Miriam still seemed aware, so Karina said, "this suit is big enough to hold the both of us. It'll be a tight squeeze, but what the hell!"

She saw Miriam's lips move slightly, so she leaned close and caught an almost inaudible whisper.

"You must leave me here and get back to your ship. I am on my way out . . . cannot breathe much longer," the whisper trailed off,

and Karina frowned. She knew Miriam was right, and she doubted the Odomak personnel could do anything for the little elf.

She stood up, looking at the frail, child-like figure. Turning to the locker, she removed the spacesuit and pulled it on. Then she put the grey cloak over her back. It may not be as effective in space as it had been on the planet's surface, but might help. She then removed a wave impulse generator from her backpack, strapped it on the suit's wristband, and set it.

Karina knelt down again, this time with difficulty because of the thickly padded spacesuit. Searching Miriam's pack, she found the two alarm bypasses, since she would need them to escape. Then, standing up again, she snapped the spacesuit helmet into place and closed the atmosphere bypass valve, which caused the suit to inflate. She noted the interior atmosphere worked properly and that she could breathe easily.

She looked at Miriam. The elfin girl was still propped up limply against the bulkhead. Her eyes had taken on a leathery appearance beneath her rectifier goggles, and they showed death was not far off.

Karina felt a lump in her throat, and squatted down to pat the girl on the shoulder. Then she stood upright and saluted. Miriam didn't seem to notice, but that didn't matter; the sign of military respect was given anyway. Karina, an Odomak from the world of Eretz, had grown to respect the elf who'd been a loyal and brave comrade, as good as any Odomak.

She turned and moved toward the airlock, deftly using the elf's alarm bypasses to leave the egress station. She mused the devices would make interesting research for the scientists as well.

Once outside the airlock, she inspected the spacesuit's control system. She floated in free space, her thickly padded arm linked through a handhold, and groaned at it. Buttons rows and rows of buttons. This was just like the clumsy, ancient suits she'd been trained in at the pathfinder academy.

The propulsion button was red, with three black dots. Now, how did the firing sequence go? Oh, yes, like the Lupian swamp frog. Eleven gurgles, a croak, and a fart. She smiled inwardly, thinking, "those silly rhymes really stick with you especially in an emergency," and prepared to head for home.

Remembering her training, she aimed herself at the distant Odomak deception freighter, noting its telltale off-green running

light next to the extended cargo bay doors. Then she pressed the igniter switch, counted the 11 relay switches clicking, then, braced herself to insure that her alignment was correct. She heard the croak of the igniter and felt the thrust of the small propellant drive. Just like the Lupian swamp frog, farting and jumping. Only this jump would take 43 minutes to complete and would cover thousands of meters of open space.

Karina prayed the cloaking cape would make her passage invisible and that the largeness of the spacesuit and slowness of movement wouldn't alert the ship's security alarms. The emergency impulse transmitter strapped to her wrist wouldn't activate until she was three minutes away from the Odomak vessel, and she prayed to the Eternal she wouldn't be vaporized by her own people before her identification beacon began its alternate wave impulse. If it started too soon, the liner's rim security would be alerted, and if it started too late her own people would blast her.

Whether by prayers or luck, Karina glided directly into the open bay of the Dristogborn and into the open arms of 20 armed and space suited security guards. They had detected her movement 18 minutes before, and her signal identified her. She learned that her arrival wasn't unexpected, since no news had been heard from her or the elf. The bodies of their three companions had been discovered and reported to the black ones. This same transmission was intercepted by the Odomak pathfinders in the grounded transit shuttle, who'd known from the descriptions, just who was dead.

At her first opportunity, Karina deposited the tiny crystal chip, entrusted to her by Miriam, to the care of the Nashramh representative on the Dristogborn, Sister Vera Mouse. She was then debriefed by her own intelligence section, and she related each phase of her mission on Phodden Morg with military precision and thoroughness, leaving nothing out.

One odd thing happened. When she'd taken the sisterhood camouflage cloak off, the neck chain had for no reason broken. She had given this cloak and the two alarm bypasses to security personnel who had set them down for a moment. But, after only a few seconds, the cloak and the alarm bypasses sitting on top of it disintegrated into a fine powder. They had nothing to study.

After the debriefing, signals were transmitted to Ben Condon and Cherette Voss to abandon their post on the planet and return

to the Dristogborn as soon as possible. The transmission escaped enemy detection, and they got away without incident in 11 days.

Ben showed no outward feeling when he heard about the loss of Miriam, but upon holding his prized vase later on in his room, the flowers turned pale. He sat for several minutes afterwards with his head in his hands, then stood up and walked over to his mirror. Standing there, his countenance cleared, and an old song -

"Where there lies the path of true love
beyond and through legends past
Welcome to a vision of wonder, the
smile beyond the looking glass. . . ."

- came to mind and he could see that elfin smile deep inside and beyond the looking glass.

Chapter 16

Cardinel

We can simply write Captain Unger Roydel off as a bigot, but then . . . we haven't always dealt off the top of the deck with our Odomak allies. Depending upon whose eyes you're looking through, Roydel is either justified in his actions or a boor. Miriam wasn't impressed by him . . . but in many ways I was . . . and am still. . . .

29:03-29 SHABIN 6720-6N5

Long, forked tongues darted fitfully in and out, taste-testing the air for things unseen and unheard. The two female reptilian creatures swiveled their heads a little as they probed the thick, methane-based atmosphere for unfamiliar tastes.

They continued through the matrix of maintenance tunnels at a fast pace, already familiar with the narrow stretches. Their long taste-sensor tongues missed nothing.

One of them paused briefly noting that something oddly acrid and dusty had passed nearby recently. The air's density was disturbed by whatever passed through the complicated tunnels.

The two followed the faint trail, pausing at brief intervals to verify their probes. They entered into a little-used maintenance passage.

Passing into the egress locker station, Frieen immediately saw a limp figure slouched next to a locker. She motioned to Ooneen to follow her as she moved closer to it. Then, looking closely at it with her wide, fish-like green eyes, and tasting the immediate air with her forked tongue, Frieen determined this was one of the objects of their search.

Meanwhile, Ooneen was examining the egress airlock door. She found traces of the acrid dust on it.

"One has passed through this lock," she hissed slowly, noting the telltale dust left behind by the alarm bypasses only a short time before by Karina.

"This one is still alive, but barely," Frieen hissed in return. "We must move quickly."

Not long after, the Sisters of Orb studied the inert body, noting its odd familiarities. One small voice rang out.

"Yes. This is Sister Miriam, whom our sisters cured on the Freeworld. See? The eyes are definitely of an ancient one . . . and the tattoo."

Ten minutes of additional testing told them all they needed to know concerning Miriam's condition. Then they discussed the diagnosis and treatment briefly.

"Yes, yes, a simple poison, but how induced I know not. We must act quickly to destroy it."

They rapidly subjected intensive blue light therapy, which passed through her living tissues. This neutralized the metallic-based substance which by now had permeated most of her nervous system. The poison had spread up to her medulla oblongata, and had inflicted negligible damage on her occipital lobes.

Once the Sisters of Orb neutralized the poison, they began the complex process of removal. The fibrous materials, making up the elf's nervous system had to be thoroughly cleaned of all foreign materials before the sisters' electro-chemical processes could begin the long task of rejuvenation. This would take time, although time to the Sisters of Orb was never a factor in their proceedings. Time was only relative to these quasi-ethereal beings.

Their main concern was to effect their injured sister's complete recovery since they took pride in restoring a patient to her former health. Besides, all wanted to help this sister of whom Friend had spoken of so highly.

Unfortunately, this sister exhibited another anomaly besides her strange eyes. She was permeated by an ethereal force that, as had been reported by the sisters of the Freeworld, was beyond their comprehension. She was obviously a special courier bearing this force on and within her physical person. This made it a matter of urgency that the Sisters of Orb expedite a prompt recovery in an otherwise nontime oriented situation.

Eighteen days later, news of the catastrophic explosions completely destroying the dark citadels of Samael-Agtren and Samael-Agboler raced through the networks of rim-world communications. Oddly, the Sisters of Orb knew of these destructive blasts even as they worked on Miriam, long before the complex of codes communicated between the warships and outposts of the Black Legions of Adam Belial were deciphered by the Galactic Common Confederation's Naval Intelligence.

The Sisters of Orb on another Starliner, the G.C.C. 'Rim Marker', reported the death of a sister-courier whom they had been unable to save due to advanced paralysis. This death was caused by the same poison that Miriam was exposed to. Obviously, both Sister Keralee Simmin and Sister Miriam had been involved in similar missions, since both were poisoned around the same time, despite distances thousands of light years apart.

Of further interest, the sisters on the Rim Marker received instructions to cryo-freeze the dead courier's body without accounting for prior gamma-B removal. In fact, the source of these orders was the legendary 'Ruby of the Sacred Stone' at Council Central.

This left no question in the minds of the Sisters of Orb: something horrible was in the offing.

Finally, the sisters of the 'Interspace Colony' received instructions to transfer the elf, Miriam B'Mesziah, to the Odomak fleet destroyer 'Cardinel' in two days. Since this would occur before G.C.C. navy deciphered the black ones' codes the unusual transaction would go unnoticed.

The Sisters of Orb were unhappy to let Miriam go so soon, for all wanted to meet her and see her back on her feet again. Unfortunately they could not, so they gave detailed instructions about her care and rehabilitation to the two Sisters of Telorbin who had first located Miriam's body. They would transfer her to the Odomak destroyer.

The Interspace Colony exited Star System 10862AA on the first day of Benem 6720-6N5 after a four month layover to receive cargo and passengers from the surrounding star systems. Now en route to another star system some 80,000 light years distant, the giant Starliner broke into temporal space only to exchange a number of Odomak passengers with a military vessel.

After successfully completing the operation on Miriam and stabilizing her condition, the Sisters of Orb prepared her to transfer to the Odomak warship along with 18 Odomak personnel who'd been traveling aboard the Interspace Colony.

Ooneen pushed the wheeled litter into the security airlock of the Odomak vessel. She and Frieen were scanned for weapons and other devices, as was the litter and the sedated elf. Once inside the airlock, they turned the patient over to Sister Heline with instructions on how to revive the girl and begin her physical rehabilitation.

"She must use her muscles every day," hissed Ooneen in her feathery voice. She cautioned, "She will recover full use of her nervous system in a short time, but will suffer intense pain from the knees down for the rest of her life. This cannot be helped."

With this, the Sisters of Telorbin left the Odomak vessel without looking back. To them it reeked of hostility towards them and their fellow Sister Heline Ness.

Heline immediately wheeled the litter to her stateroom and reported the transfer to Commander Horst Belline, the ship's security chief. Half an hour later he arrived, accompanied by the destroyer's surgeon, Doctor Miles Babel, to check on the elf's condition. Heline welcomed the two, informing them that Miriam was her fellow sister.

"This is Lieutenant Miriam B'Meszhiah, who was commissioned into an Odomak pathfinder team for a special mission." Heline said easily. "She is now suffering from wounds she received during that duty. Beyond this, I have no information."

Using several electronic tools, the doctor made a fast series of tests on the sleeping elf. "She has nothing communicable," he said coldly. Heline inwardly winced at his tone, but showed nothing on her sweet, impassive face.

After he finished his tests, Doctor Babel pulled out the information disc accompanying Miriam. He inserted it into his compu-pad and read it intently, learning the extent of the elf's wounds and the procedures to correct them.

He shook his head in wonder. "Whoever operated on this girl was a genius," he murmured appreciatively before he left the room.

Heline turned to Commander Belline, and briefed him on her instructions. "Miriam will be given a duty assignment as soon as possible. When she can function again, she won't be a passive

passenger, but instead a part of your combat crew under the ship's officers."

Belline made a note of this in his records and approved the action since they fit in with directives under the Nashramh-Odomak War Powers Treaty. Turning to leave, he said, "let me know if you make anything of those enemy communications. The sheer volume of them indicates that something is up."

Helene mused about the communications. "Yes, indeed," she thought. "The two remaining black fortresses have been destroyed by an unknown means. Something is up."

Belline saluted smartly and left, striding down the polished corridors of the large vessel. He had an intense dislike for these sisters and their secret ways, despite the treaty. They always seemed to know more than was good for them, leaving the men who were in control in the dark. But, he did admire Sister Helene who was smart, cheerful, and cooperative without being overwhelming. She might also have secrets, but she didn't rub his nose in them.

He puzzled over the number of new codes the black ones had been sending to each other. The Odomaks had been successfully intercepting them, but so far, they hadn't broken them. Until they could be deciphered, the Odomak Naval Security and G.C.C. security would have to be doubly on guard against hostile action.

Within a week, the G.C.C. deciphered the enemy codes and placed all naval ships on a war footing. All cargo and passenger craft were rerouted away from the rim zones of 303A, B, and C, where analysts expected enemy action. They knew the enemy warships would shoot at anything along this part of the outer rim, and the G.C.C. wanted no civilian craft around.

Helene knew the content of the enemy codes moments after the two devastating explosions through her special communications with Council Central. She had also been ordered, before the two fortresses were destroyed, to disband her training academy on Riga V and to move both students and faculty to 90 waiting sisterhood warships for transfer to a safer location. She and her adjutant, Sister Quinn Mavis, had been ordered to serve on the destroyer Cardinel as a liaison between the Odomaks and the Nashramh, as required by the War Powers Pact of the G.C.C. Amalgamated Cooperation Treaty #2116.

Captain Unger Roydel, commanding the OND Cardinel, bitterly protested the transfer of non-Odomaks onto his warship. Rim Fleet Admiralty's Policy Group overruled him. He begrudgingly gave the two sisters out-of-the-way quarters near the garbage disposal-recycle station, which only emphasized their inferior status and his low opinion concerning them. Yet, unknown to him, Helene had commanded the naval fleets of three entire star systems in her long career and outranked him many times over.

The small quarters were of no consequence to either of the sisters, or to Miriam when she awoke, just as rank meant nothing. Only the job at hand was important, but it certainly seemed the Odomaks were trying their best to make it hard. Although the Odomak navy officers were bigoted bores, Helene respected their fighting ability and tenacity in battle. Captain Roydel, despite his overt biases and undiplomatic attitude, was among their best and most qualified.

It took Helene two days to revive Miriam from her drugged sleep. The girl still couldn't move her limbs, so for the first week Helene and Quinn took only catnaps until Miriam had proved she could move about on her bed and perform the prescribed exercises. The two sisters took 15-hour duty watches and alternated 15-hour shifts in their quarters with Miriam.

Miriam displayed an iron will and unlimited self-discipline. Within a month she was walking, although she required crutches for the next two months after that. She also began working her own duty watch, overlapping with Helene's and Quinn's watches until it became obvious she could handle the workload alone. After that, they worked 10-hour watches that gave each 20 hours off.

The first reports of enemy action came within a month after Miriam's secret transfer to the Cardinel. The enemy blasted seven civilian craft nearby and showed every inclination to blast anything that moved in revenge for the destruction of their fortresses. They also discontinued sending coded messages to each other on any known channels, so Odomak Security had no idea what the enemy would do next.

After the first reports, the Cardinel moved into a strategic position, between the fleeing Starliner Interspace Colony and four accompanying freighters, and the last reported location of the enemy's warships.

Nearly a month after the Cardinal assumed her station, the enemy acted. Without warning, a monstrous black cruiser appeared out of nowhere, breaking into temporal space a short distance from the Odomak destroyer. The Cardinal, a warship only 40 kilometers in length and 16 kilometers in breadth, was dwarfed by the giant cruiser, which measured an awesome 200 kilometers long and 60 wide.

At first sight, the Cardinal's port-side gunners fired 160 torpedo canisters in an interrupted pattern toward the larger ship while firing a salvo of high-energy laser bolts before the cruiser's shield screens came fully into effect. As the screen extended, gigantic green flashes lit up the star-speckled void as the enemy's black hull and partially raised shields absorbed the laser bolt energy.

The Cardinal's own screen shield glowed bright blue for an instant and the ship's viewscreens darkened to accommodate the blinding light. Klaxons rang out in red alert. Personnel all over the ship made for their battle stations.

Suddenly, the Cardinal shuddered, a gaping hole appearing in her aft reactor deck. Instantly, airlocks sealed shut around the affected area and frantic personnel, who had already donned their atmospheric-pressure suits during the general alert, hung onto secure equipment and counters as the ship lurched. While the atmosphere hissed out of the affected area, the protective suits hardened on contact with the cold of space and sealed the normal atmosphere inside them.

Emergency chem-lights flashed on aboard the bridge, casting a red glow over the busy command crew. Klaxons sounded with loud shrieks and dozens of damage reports rang out from each section.

"What the hell was that?" Captain Roydel roared. "Do we have power, engineering!"

The weapons control officer looked into his O-band scanner, squinting to see through the red lighting. "Sir, whatever hit us doesn't show up on our defense shields. We seem to be in a full screening mode. Whatever it was bypassed our shields."

Captain Roydel didn't hesitate a second. Swiveling to face the viewscreen, he ordered the ship into a zigzag maneuver at flank speed so the huge enemy ship couldn't follow. He needed to determine what damage his ship had sustained.

"Captain!" shouted the range control officer. "An explosion has occurred on the enemy ship. Wait! There's been a secondary

detonation as well." He paused. "The first was one of our torpedo canisters detonating, and the second is from an unknown origin."

Roydel nodded, then, looked into his stern viewscreen which showed the diminishing enemy vessel. The Cardinal continued her desperate maneuver until she was far out of range of the larger ship which, oddly enough, didn't pursue. Perhaps they didn't want to encounter more of our torpedo canisters, Roydel mused.

The Cardinal made for her own lines, leaving a distinct trail of radiation-laden particles.

"Captain," said another officer. "We're leaving a trail of radiation which will make us easy to follow."

Roydel swiveled his chair to face the man, already knowing that his ship was mortally damaged. The look on the man's face confirmed it. He nodded.

Punching the general comm-link, he ordered all able-bodied personnel to abandon ship on her two auxiliary lifeboat-fighters.

All around the vessel personnel scurried to either their battle stations or to the escape craft. On her personal comm-link, Helene received the orders to report to one of the two lifeboats and for Sister Quinn to report to the other. This was a standard procedure, and she knew that only the wounded and essential 'core' personnel would remain on the damaged ship. This included Miriam.

Helene's eyes misted. She had grown to like and respect Miriam during this past month of working closely with her, and didn't want to leave her behind. She knew full well it was necessary, but she had never forgotten or gotten over having to imprison the elf on Riga V. Leaving her behind to die seemed to be another unfair thing to do. Blinking back the tears, she consulted with Quinn and prepared to leave.

The three sisters said their farewells quickly, for time was of the essence. People were madly running about the ship and in scant moments the escape craft would be closed off. Helene and Quinn kissed Miriam, knowing they would not see her again. They saluted her, then left for their assigned stations without further ceremony.

Miriam understood why she had been left behind. Because of her wounds, she was lame. Personnel with wounds as disabling as hers wouldn't have a chance on any of the hostile worlds the lifeboats would probably have to land on. If she went, she would be more of a hindrance than a help.

Ejecting the lifeboats took less than 20 minutes. Before-hand, the Cardinal threw out a screen of 800 thermal mines and 200 torpedo canisters in a fan-like spread. First, the deadly screen would slow the enemy, and second, they would obscure the escaping fighter craft by confusing enemy radars.

The two vessels were ejected 10,000 kilometers apart. They remained dormant, without power, until the Cardinal created a diversion to draw off the pursuing enemy cruiser. When they did move, the two dark ships appeared as space junk amid the fan of deadly mines and torpedo canisters.

The Cardinal continued along on her straight line course for another 500,000 kilometers, rocked twice by deadly internal explosions, before changing her heading. The radiation trail showed the change, then, without warning, abruptly ended as Roydel cut all power. The destroyer continued to drift straight ahead for another 16 minutes, then altered her heading back to the direction where the short battle had taken place earlier.

"Engage auxiliary impulse drives to full ahead," ordered Roydel, wondering just how he was going to distract the enemy as well as inflict any serious damage on him. The emergency impulse drives pushed the stricken vessel slowly back toward the battle zone for 30 minutes. Then he ordered all power cut off again.

The Cardinal drifted in the void between the cold sparkling fields of stars for a long time. She remained without lights or energy emissions, with all nonessential equipment shut down. Only the signal receivers and grid-screen on the bridge remained active.

Roydel sat staring at the large grid screen, rubbing his chin. He planned to get his ship as close to the enemy cruiser as possible before ramming it and setting off his deadman mechanism. This mechanism, when activated, was held in position by a trusted officer stationed in a sealed room near the ship's sub-binary drives. When the officer released the spring-loaded handle of the mechanism, the Cardinal would explode.

Roydel hoped to maneuver the Cardinal close to the enemy vessel and to penetrate its hull by ramming it. The Destroyer's deadman apparatus detonating on impact would create massive shock-waves that would hopefully induce the enemy's own man to release his deadman switch and, in turn, destroy the giant cruiser. It was a long shot, and wouldn't work if the Cardinal was too far

away. The destroyer was too badly damaged to escape from the pursuing cruiser, so it was only a decision to die running or while attacking. Roydel would be damned if he would die while running.

Now the only problem was getting close enough to do some damage.

Roydel and his chief gunner watched the grid screen intently, noticing that the enemy's probing radars were increasing in magnitude. Soon, the brilliant star field behind the giant cruiser shimmered and became distorted by its screen shields. Roydel felt his temples throbbing, and he was perspiring heavily.

"Captain!" exclaimed the chief gunner. "He has a hole in his screen shield. Look . . . to the left of the impact crater from our torpedo."

"Fire one torpedo canister at those coordinates and no more," he ordered decisively. This was not the tactic he had planned on, and it could alert the enemy to his ship's position and intent before he was close enough to attack. But, now he had a feeling . . . maybe, just maybe a single torpedo canister might escape the cruiser's attention. If it got through and detonated, the Cardinel could make for the breach in the enemy's screen shield and dive straight through to impact against the superior vessel. He felt it was important to follow the inspiration this opening had given him.

The gunner fired a single dark torpedo canister, and Roydel watched as the almost invisible object sped toward the oncoming enemy cruiser. It was heading directly toward the breach in the screen shield, and Roydel fervently hoped it would do the trick. The enemy cruiser was closing fast, and was now only 150,000 kilometers away. Tension mounted on the silent bridge.

The gunner's aim was excellent. As the huge enemy ship closed in on them, Roydel saw a small, almost in-significant flash appear within the original impact crater. Suddenly, there was a blinding flash that lit up the void.

"My God, we hit a magazine!" Roydel gasped in surprise.

No less than 30 explosions ensued. Then all was darkness except for the glitter of stars.

"Captain, the main reactors didn't go," announced the range monitor. "The enemy has altered course and is making a tactical maneuver to protect him from being rammed."

"Damn," muttered Roydel. Then, narrowing his shrewd grey eyes, he ordered, "Fire a pattern of 60 torpedo canisters. Then let's get out of here. Gunner, do it now!"

"Yes sir!" The 60 canisters went out, one at a time and all aimed at the retreating enemy ship.

"Helm, take us to Surgum XXIII. Move it! Navigation, make the plot for our shortest passage." The destroyer circled and ran on her weak auxiliary impulse drives.

After two days, the engineering section could certify the integrity of the sub-binary drives and Roydel gave the order to proceed. The Cardinal dropped into the sub-binary and began her 14 month voyage to Surgum XXIII.

Miriam's communications analysis section was without power, and she couldn't contact the bridge. She rubbed her head where it was bruised; she had been thrown against the bulkhead when the ship was jarred by a second internal explosion resulting from the earlier battle. The other three crew members with her were also wounded, two with burns from electrical discharges caused by equipment malfunctions, and one from internal injuries.

She was in charge, so she stopped rubbing her head. "Let's get down to sick bay and see about these injuries. We can't do anything here." Then with help from one of the burned Odomaks, she managed to get the unconscious man to the sick bay.

When they arrived, no beds were available. Looking around in dismay, Miriam immediately flung open a cabinet. She found a number of rolled up blankets, unfolded one and laid it on the deck. Then, grunting with effort, she and the wounded man lowered their injured crewmate onto half of the blanket and covered him with the other half. Miriam took off her light jacket and folded it to make a pillow.

The Odomak crewman who helped her carry the unconscious man found a damp cloth and began to administer first aid to his companion. Once the injured man was in stable condition, Miriam left him with his crewmates and made her way past several wounded people. She asked a tired-looking doctor, "May I be of assistance? My section is no longer in operation."

Olber Frushe looked at the off-breed dressed in a lieutenant's uniform and frowned. "What can you do?" he mumbled hurriedly. "I don't need bedpan orderlies."

Miriam ignored the slight. "I have been trained in combat medicine and surgery. May I help you?" Oddly enough, she didn't remember being trained in these areas, but some familiar compulsion made her say so and think she did indeed have the experience.

Frushe was already overwhelmed by wounded and dying crewmen, and was in no position to let his biases rule his judgment. He had more than 500 badly wounded people, half of them critically. He needed all the help he could get.

"Can you handle radiation burns?" he asked in a tired voice.

"Yes."

"All right, report to Tolbin Kisner in the burn and radiation poisoning section," he agreed, pushing past her without further comment.

Nurse-Sergeant Kisner was equally rude, but welcomed any help she could get. Miriam located the various medical supplies and shock suppressors required for radiation trauma. Then she went from one patient to another, some of whom lay on beds and makeshift litters, while others lay on the deck. Many had already died, while others were in shock.

Slowly she suppressed the intensity of the extreme cases of shock she encountered and along with the help of other personnel she spared a number of lives and maintained some degree of order.

Tolbin Kisner began to notice Miriam's expert handiwork on the badly wounded. It was better than anything she had seen under such circumstances before. This little off-breed with crutches knew more about this kind of treatment than anyone else, except Doctor Frushe.

Tolbin Grudgingly admired the foreigner's skills and workmanship. There was no question that many of those badly burned crew members knew who had saved their lives and had so gently and efficiently reduced their agonies.

Miriam herself was surprised at her own efficiency. She did things to ease the pain and suffering of the wounded she didn't remember learning. She bathed and dressed many different kinds of wounds, administered pain-killers, set broken bones, and performed other specialized tasks as if she had worked with them every day for years. Many of the wounded didn't want her to touch them, but in a soft voice, she told them she was in charge here and that they were under her direct command. That, coupled with the

strange softness of her eyes, caused even the most biased to melt and allow her to administer to his or her wounds. To the ones who were on the verge of death, and whom she could not help, she spoke soft prayers and gave an inner support that eased their suffering.

The Cardinel was proceeding directly to the Odomak naval facility at Surgum XXIII, the nearest outpost and garrison in this area. The voyage would, if all went well, take just under 14 months. Roydel was pleased when he received the results from the helm; he had anticipated more than two years and hadn't originally accepted his navigator's first estimate which later proved to be accurate. Now he was relieved, for the Cardinel wasn't as badly damaged as originally thought. Only the main impulse drives had been taken out and four of the central power reactors heavily damaged, but the remaining three reactors did the job and that was what counted.

After Roydel and his Operations Officer, Lieutenant Senior Grade Deker Oberline commenced a survey of battle damage and a performance analysis of each section and its officers during the conflict, they reviewed his lists of the officers and crew who remained aboard.

Roydel started. There was an unfamiliar name on the list: B'Mesziah, Miriam - Lieutenant. Rubbing his chin, he narrowed his eyes and tried to recall the odd name, but couldn't. This was definitely out of order. The Captain personally knew every officer on his ship and had passed judgment on the assignment of each. This one was a complete mystery to him.

"Who the hell is this?" he asked Oberline, pointing to the name on the roster.

Oberline studied it for a moment. "Damned if I know, Captain, but we'll soon find out."

Then, turning, he barked "Yeoman! Locate this Lieutenant Miriam B'Mesziah and have her report to the bridge immediately."

The Yeoman checked the duty roster, locating Miriam's name under hospital duty.

Miriam knew something was wrong as soon as she stepped through the bridge door, since she sensed a strong atmosphere of hostility and anger directed towards her. As she entered, she set aside the plastic crutches she had been using and walked carefully, and painfully, to the two officers who stood obviously

waiting for her. Once in front of them, she stood respectfully at attention and saluted.

"Lieutenant B'Meszhiah reporting," she said.

Her salute was not returned. The Captain measured her with cool grey eyes, and spat, "who the hell are you?"

Two dozen officers and technicians on the bridge turned to observe the confrontation.

"Sir, I am Lieutenant Miriam B'Meszhiah of the Nashramh Sisterhood, assigned to this vessel from the Odomak pathfinder team OXB113 by Sister-Magum Helene Ness," she responded crisply. Yet her heart sank. She knew that no matter what she said the captain wouldn't believe her. These two men were obviously her enemies, and were going to let their biases toward off-breeds overrule their judgment.

"Who in hell let you on board this ship, and when?" shouted Oberline. "I have no record of your assignment."

Miriam tried to explain the details as well as she could. "I was brought on board by Sister-Magum Helene Ness and Sister Quinn Mavis, who had the event recorded by your chief of ship security, Commander Belline. I was unconscious at the time and unable to meet you personally. As I was rehabilitated, I was assigned to a position at Communications Section 3A2, which has been shut down due to battle damage. Since then, for several days, I have been working in the sick bay."

Miriam's explanation fell on deaf ears. Roydel was furious. "You, an off-breed something or other, dare to come aboard my ship and impersonate an officer?"

Miriam remained silent. There was nothing she could say or do that would change his already set mind. She doubted that if Commander Belline were here himself, that he could make any difference, and he was either dead or on one of the lifeboats.

Inwardly she sighed in frustration. Well, this Captain Roydel might be the Odomak Navy's finest destroyer commander, but he was in no way a diplomat or politician.

Lieutenant Oberline walked over to her and tore her insignia off as if it would burn his hands. With contempt he hissed, "you filthy animal! Who do you think you are, wearing these?"

Miriam mused at his insolence toward her, and wondered what would happen next. If she was right they would. . . .

Roydel turned to a lieutenant standing a short distance away, "Jager, take this filthy creature to the brig and confine it there until we dock at Surgum XXIII."

The young officer walked briskly over to Miriam and roughly directed her towards the door. The trip to the ship's brig was agonizing for her because he shoved her out of the bridge without giving her a chance to retrieve her crutches. She tried in vain to walk normally and to keep up with him. Somehow, though, she kept her composure and made it to her cell without showing her pain.

When she arrived at the ship's brig, she was stripped naked, photographed, and scanned for hidden weapons. As they did so, she wondered what would happen if a Tzian were in this same position. These feline sisters, although soft and vulnerable-looking and very attractive, were equipped by nature with claws that sheathed themselves and razor sharp teeth. Perhaps the Odomaks would try to disarm them, teeth and all.

Miriam was rudely pushed into a steel cell with nothing in it but a shower and a toilet.

After the off-breed had been imprisoned, Captain Roydel was given a thin file on Miriam B'Meszhiah of the Nashramh Sisterhood, who claimed to have been commissioned as a lieutenant in the Odomak Pathfinder Corps, team OXB113. He had no doubt she was in fact from the damned sisterhood, since it was made up of all sorts of strange breeds. But he was also convinced her reason for being on his ship was, consciously or unconsciously, to act as a spy.

Roydel did remember authorizing two special Nashramh representatives on his ship. But only two: Ness and Mavis. This file on the off-breed did, however, include security chief Commander Belline's report of her transfer aboard and his conversation with the witch Ness. Since Belline had been assigned to one of the escape craft, Roydel didn't feel inclined to follow this up. He was also suspicious that the file might have been altered.

The file also contained a medical report and comments from the ship's surgeon, who was also transferred to a lifeboat, which sounded ridiculously farfetched. Also, sick-bay acknowledged that the creature had done some work with the wounded. Otherwise it was noncommittal.

Photographs taken of the naked girl by the ship's security personnel and her non-Odomak heritage really convinced Roydel that the elf was a Nashramh spy. They showed her to have a great deal of sex appeal, which stood to reason. The witches of that damnable sisterhood used innocent-looking and sexually appealing women to charm their way into men's confidence and to corrupt them with sexual favors. It was an old story.

But more importantly, there was the crude tattoo on her right forearm. He made special note of it and learned it was of Borgdragon origin. This convinced him completely she was not only a spy for the sisterhood, but also for the black enemy from whom not one single being had ever been known to escape.

In Roydel's estimation, all this added up to an unauthorized plant, and he wasn't about to let the matter drop. How dare those sisters, who had no conception of how the real military worked, try to keep tabs on him and his ship and to corrupt his crew?

He momentarily considered summary execution of the creature, but decided that a court-martial would be more effective and humiliating for her and those arrogant witches. This was, after all, an Odomak warship, not an off-breed bordello or guest house for enemy infiltrators.

Roydel had never considered he was one of the least qualified officers in the entire Odomak naval fleet to make such judgments, or that the sisterhood had any reason to exist other than to throw monkey wrenches into men's business. He felt perfectly secure in his overwhelming belief that all off-breeds were subhuman and without intelligence, as well as being corrupting and dangerous to real humans.

After he finished with her file, Roydel turned his mind to more important matters and forgot about the girl until his ship had arrived at Surgum XXIII.

The Cardinel limped alongside the admiralty repair facility MA-7061U, which was stationed in an elliptic orbit around the small sun Surgum XXIII. Once the umbilical and mooring connections were secured and the pressurized transfer tubes installed, teams of medical personnel came aboard to remove the wounded. They were, in turn, followed by damage control and engineering repair teams, and then the grave registration contingent.

Roydel had been looking forward to having his ship repaired and a short shore leave for his crew. He was surprised when the

ship's audio-comm announced that two government officials were awaiting him in the officer's wardroom. He tiredly pulled himself out of his command chair, and with a frown strode briskly from the bridge, accompanied by Lieutenant Jager. He was irritated that these bureaucrats could not restrain themselves from an inspection until the dead and wounded had at least been removed.

As he entered the wardroom, he saw the two officials, a man and a woman, waiting placidly for him. He noted that the man, if one could call him that, was one of those soft, country club types who had manicures and spent their miserable lives mumbling intellectualisms and drinking cocktails. The woman was a skinny old crow, obviously from that damned sisterhood.

Well, they were in for a surprise. He was going to have that off-breed in the brig subjected to a court-martial that would terminate with a summary execution. That would knock those damned witches down a notch or two!

Roydel marched up to the two, his brisk manner showing his irritation at having to even bother with them.

"What can I do for you?" he asked hurriedly. "Have you important business on this vessel?"

"Hmmm, ahhh, yes," hummed the powder-puff man.

Roydel's thin lips tightened in disgust and he crossed his arms, annoyed. It looked like he would be here for the next hour in greetings.

The official continued. "We have, ahem, come here to collect Lieutenant Miriam B'Mesziah, ahhh, whom you have, ahhh, incarcerated in this lovely vessel's brig," he toned, getting directly to the point in his slow, drawling manner. "Ahhh, I wish to ahhh, introduce you to, ahhhhh Sister-Magum Florence Mannaly of the, ahhh, Nashramh Sisterhood and, ahhh, I am, ahhh Ambassador Shell Hoomel of the Galactic Common Confederation and ahhhhh, Governor General of this station," he said politely. "This, ahhh, Miriam B'Mesziah is now a ward of, hmmm, the Nashramh Sisterhood, and uhh, is to be released immediately to ehhe, Sister-Magum Mannaly."

Roydel sighed tiredly. "No, that will not be possible," he stated coldly. "The off-breed is a prisoner of the Odomak Navy and will be placed on trial for espionage."

Hoomel's eyes shone. "Hmmm, I have given you an order from, uh, the Admiralty, Captain," he drawled in his low, cool voice. "Do let us be reasonable. The girl is ah, no longer your concern."

"We'll see about that," Roydel hissed acidly.

"One moment," Sister Florence broke in. She had caught a subtle signal that the Captain gave his door guard, who disappeared. Her voice was charged with a tone of authority that stopped Roydel in mid-sentence. Her steel-grey eyes flashed and her lips tightened.

"If, of course, you wish to speak on behalf of the Odomak Government and refuse to release Sister Miriam immediately, you will have single-handedly abolished our mutual defense and consular treaty. Do you wish to be responsible for this?"

Behind Roydel, three armed guards entered the bridge.

Roydel almost shouted, "Are you threatening me?"

Sister Florence inwardly flinched. This man, despite his awesome military achievements, was completely unreasonable. The only thing that might get his attention would be a duel with her fiber laser. But, that was not her purpose here. She sighed.

"If, sir, I leave this ship without the girl, alive, or I myself am killed on the way, the Nashramh will be forced to consider our treaty as null and void. Do I make myself quite clear, Captain?"

Roydel stiffened. "On this vessel I'm in control and I'm the law, not a mere sisterhood witch. Your damned treaty is for diplomats to wrangle and lie over."

"Nevertheless," toned Sister Florence.

Hoomel broke in. His manner abruptly changed, and he was direct. "Perhaps you don't fully comprehend the situation, Captain Roydel, or just who we are. As I told you before, I am Ambassador Shell Hoomel, the G.C.C. governor of this station, and my companion is Sister-Magum Florence Mannaly, ambassador for the Nashramh Sisterhood. Now, if the girl is not turned over to Sister Mannaly immediately, I'll be forced to accept the fact that you are committing mutiny. I'll have to relieve you of your command and place you under government arrest."

Roydel started to speak, then, stopped. His ship was now moored and secured to the base station, and he was technically and legally under the jurisdiction of this governor general.

Frowning with a sense of chagrin, he replied, "As you wish. Give me 15 minutes."

"I give you ten minutes, Captain."

Roydel stiffened, "Jager, get the girl here on the double."

"Yes sir." Jager then picked up the nearest comm-link and instructed the ship's brig officer to release the prisoner Miriam B'Mesziah immediately.

The order was acknowledged, and Jager whirled and left the wardroom, heading straight for the brig. He didn't know what this was all about, but he wasn't going to let the old man down.

The cell door slammed open, awakening Miriam out of her meditation. An Odomak guard barked, "all right! Come on out."

Miriam slowly stood up, her legs hurting, and he shouted, "move!" Looking at him, she stepped through the door, knowing that help had finally come and that she would be released. She didn't know how long she'd been in the cell, and had passed the time in the usual way: eating, sleeping, meditating, and exercising.

She had continued to work on her rehabilitation exercises in the small area, and by now she could walk fairly well, although she felt excruciating pain below her knees. She received meals of bread and water, but even this insult didn't bother her. She was too unimpressed by the Odomaks to care.

At least she'd made it this far. With this foolish bigot commanding the vessel, she expected to be summarily executed. But the gruff, almost angry manner of the guard told her she would be released. If he'd been good-natured she would have expected to be killed.

Well, no matter. This phase of her mission was over. Now she could look to her uncertain future.

The guard threw her rumpled uniform and underwear at her. "Get dressed on the double," he ordered, not impressing her one bit. She complied without comment, dressing quickly and pulling the boots over her tender feet. Then he led her out of the brig and quickly marched toward the officer's wardroom.

Miriam hurried to keep up with the guard, but her lower legs were so stricken with anguishing pain that they threatened to cramp and fail her. She struggled to control her aching muscles and to keep up with the fast walking guard.

She was relieved when Lieutenant Jager met them halfway. "I'll take her from here," he said. The guard saluted him, then turned and marched back to the brig.

Jager ordered briskly, "come with me, you. You're leaving this ship!" He spat out the last.

He was surprised when the woman didn't respond but simply slowed her pace. He turned and walked on, then looked back and saw that she refused to keep up with him. He slowed.

Upon entry to the wardroom, Miriam stepped directly over to Sister Mannaly's side and said clearly, "let's get out of here," looking directly into Roydel's scornful eyes. The two turned and left without another word.

Roydel stood as if transfixed for several minutes. Those eyes had done something to him. He had seen hell in them. He had seen the elf look right into and through his very essence. She hadn't thought very much of what she'd seen, and this disconcerted him. She must be some sort of sorceress.

He made no move to stop them. The ambassador bowed, turned, and followed them out. By the time Roydel had fully recovered his senses, the three had left the ship.

Once aboard the station, Miriam took a tube car to the Nashramh Embassy, where she and Sister Florence disembarked. Ambassador Hoomel made official apologies, then, departed for his own embassy to begin the tough process of smoothing the ruffled feathers of the sisterhood and Roydel's foolish pride. Upon his return, he was surprised to learn that the sisterhood failed to acknowledge the unfortunate incident ever happened or even that Lieutenant Miriam B'Mesziah existed. The matter was closed.

Sister Florence took Miriam directly to the embassy's cryogenic processing facility.

"We have instructions to cryo-freeze you immediately and to ship you out of here as soon as possible." She paused, then, continued. "I'm sorry that I can't speak with you and add some comfort to your wounds, but our orders are classified as urgent."

Miriam, had until now been silent, said, "I thank you, Sister-Magum Florence Mannaly, for your most welcome aid. I do understand the urgency for getting me out of here, knowing the Odomaks. They will not take failure lightly." she smiled wryly.

She was then stripped of her crumpled clothing, given a blue radiation bath, and prepared for cryo-freeze.

The girl's frozen body was packed in an innocuous shipping container marked, 'Frozen Cuttlefish Tongues - destination Mr. Oglead Zorbik, Tantilla, MD00165003-N4. Collect on delivery'.

Chapter 17

Secrets

If the truth be known . . . we have secrets transcending the ages . . . secrets of how Magums are brought together, human souls recovered after physical death and installed in new bodies . . . and many far more profound in their implications. Herein Miriam learns something about herself and our ancient sisterhood . . . but, there are more questions raised than answers . . . for instance, who is Miriam?

10:00-02 NASHIM 6744-6N5

Miriam slowly regained consciousness. Her eyes focused hazily on two large blurred figures. Then her sense of hearing returned - almost like an explosion of sound suddenly entering her unclogged ears.

A hissing voice delightedly said, "Ooooooh! What wonderful morsels, these cuttlefish. But only one tongue. Shall we boil it whole, or just the tongue?"

As Miriam's eyes began to clear, two figures came into stark focus - dragon-like faces with wide, lipless mouths that were filled with rows of sharp, jagged teeth.

"Do you like our teeth?" the hissing voice asked, "All the better to eat you with."

Miriam tried to crane her head so she could look around, but she was paralyzed. Everything she did see seemed somehow unreal, and was edged with mistiness caused by her still clearing vision. She felt warm.

Now she realized she was completely submerged, except for her head in a warm, oily fluid. She was floating within a large, polished

metal container, and she could see another nearby with several hoses and tubes attached, presumably like the one she was in.

"Herein we boil our little morsel," hissed the grinning mouth, if that was indeed a grin. It saw her looking at the other thaw-tube.

Miriam wanted to answer, but her vocal cords were unresponsive, and she had difficulty breathing. Were they really going to eat her? She didn't know, but after her ordeal with the Odomaks she was inclined to accept whatever horrible fate overcame her.

An eternity seemed to pass as the two reptiles discussed recipes and connoisseur foods, some of which were eaten alive. Then one of assistants eased a tube into Miriam's mouth and guided it gently down her throat to her stomach. Miriam wanted desperately to gag, but her muscles wouldn't obey.

"Now we give you a little broth, since you kindly make broth for us," the hissing mouth announced. Miriam was fascinated as she watched the reptiles' large, wide mouths trying to make human sounds.

The warm fluid entered Miriam's digestive tract, and within minutes full feeling returned. Her body began to function, and within a few hours she was removed from the recovery tube, showered, and dressed in a soft white robe, without underwear.

"You're to go to Ruby now," hissed one of the reptiles. Miriam misinterpreted the odd sounding words, or she must have. She thought the dragon said, 'Ruby'.

"We are the Sisters of the Gate, past whom all who see Ruby must pass."

Miriam shook her head. She must be dreaming. Everything still seemed foggy.

Without further ceremony, the reptiles coaxed Miriam through a tall, ornately decorated door into a long, softly lit hallway. The door silently closed behind her, without any further comments from the Sisters of the Gate. She was going to see Ruby?

Miriam decided that she must be dead, or at least in a long waking dream like the one she experienced with the Sisters of Orb. Everything around her had a magical, ethereal quality to it, and the hallway, which appeared to recede forever, was bathed in a soft ivory glow.

Her senses strangely acute, Miriam walked slowly down the long hall. The smooth floor felt cool under her feet, and she could

almost fancy entering into a huge, garden from a door that would open at the end. . . .

She walked hesitantly until she reached the end, which was not really far off. A door silently slid open, revealing a ruby-red glowing room. She passed through in wide-eyed wonder, and the door slid shut behind her.

The room was completely empty, except for the beautiful light. Miriam then noticed the wall in front of her, with its emanating ruby light, began to swirl in random light patterns much as other mirror screens did. But these patterns were different; the shades of red slowly blended and focused, forming the once familiar image of Ruby.

Miriam stood with her mouth open as the impact of the sight struck her and her mind reeled in confusion. She had left Ruby back at Borgdragon Citadel!

"How can this be?" Miriam gasped in disbelief. "I left you back at the black wall."

Ruby, leaning back in a soft chair, smiled gently. "Dear Miriam, you have much to learn. Now is the time to begin."

Still astonished, Miriam focused her attention on the older woman. She wondered what she would learn. It seemed to her that, although she didn't remember learning many lessons, she always seemed to know what to do at the right time, and wanted to know still more. Perhaps she would learn about her dim past.

"Have you ever wondered about what it is that you have been carrying as a special courier for our Nashramh Sisterhood?" Ruby asked, and paused. "What could be so important about you that so much treasure and effort has been expended to move you across this galaxy, to bring you here?"

Miriam didn't know where 'here' was, and she didn't ask. "I have never dared to think about it, for the implications seemed too overwhelming." She confessed, "I have just tried to do the right thing at the right time, and to . . . to belong." She paused a moment, frowning in concentration.

"Without the sisterhood I have nothing. I have no family, no friends no past, just loneliness."

Ruby considered this revelation of Miriam's inner mind, not because it was so revealing but because it was so honest.

"Sit down on the floor, my child. You'll be here awhile. I'm going to tell you who you really are and also disclose two of our sisterhood's most closely guarded secrets."

Miriam settled herself on the floor, which was extremely soft like a deep carpet. So, she was going to learn about her past. But what Ruby revealed was not what she had anticipated.

Ruby looked intently at her. "First, you're not one person, Miriam. You're ten distinctly different people who share the same identity and mind."

Miriam's eyes widened in amazement but somehow she felt comfortable with Ruby's revelation. She didn't think of herself as anything other than one person, but somehow what Ruby said seemed familiar. Yet how could this be?

Ruby continued. "You remember your lessons from Borgdragon; the individual is made up of three parts: spirit, mind, and soul. Compare this to the simplest individual atoms of the temporal universe which are made up of the proton, neutron, and electron. You, however, are like the Neon atom, which has ten of each. Neon is probably a good example because it is capable of substantial variations, which is a common characteristic of all Sisters-Magum of our sisterhood." She paused a moment, and Miriam shook her head as if to clear it; this was astounding. Was she, a Sister-Magum? This was impossible. They were the highest-ranking and most ancient of all sisters, and seemed to know everything.

Ruby smiled, as if reading her thoughts. "You are indeed a Sister-Magum, Miriam, although of a special kind who is both new and old."

"Miriam, you have many talents, don't you?" she asked, and Miriam remembered all the times she seemed to know more than she'd ever learned. "Isn't it interesting that you know how to play so many musical instruments and how to treat the wounded and dying so efficiently and gently? Where do you think this special knowledge came from?"

Miriam considered this. She had always believed she'd learned everything at Borgdragon, but because of the disease had been unable to remember the lessons. "I thought it was you who had taught me, Ruby." Then she thought again. How did Ruby know about her doctoring?

"Now you know that isn't true. Those personalities which make you a whole being have made it possible for you to draw from all of

their experiences as well as your own. All they knew and experienced in each of their lives is accessible to you as if you had done them yourself."

Miriam nodded. Now she understood the mysterious glances and comments that Sister Ellen Cush had made when she was tested on Phelhan.

Ruby told her a little about each of the women who made up a part of her being. One was Sister Olimine, a musician of Chajoth ancestry who had pleased people with her unique musical talents. Another was Sister ChiMon, a biochemical systems research analyst from the Chasmalim, who had also been a surgeon. The six other sisters, who were experienced in the arts and sciences of galactic knowledge, were an integral part of the Nashramh. Their names were Sister Anim of the Arelim, Sister Salphine of the Lower Chajothim, Sisters Tengi and Telengi of the Seraphim, Sister Kaalou of the Kerubim, and Sister Nestorah of the Leven Adah from Tziah. All had come as prisoners to the black fortress of Samael-Borgdragon and had given their young lives to save the trillions of innocents throughout the Starset Galaxy from the totalitarian doctrine of Samael's discompassionate will. All died young, but somehow Miriam got the impression they weren't just physically young, but also young in repeated life experiences.

Now Miriam began to understand that each individual human lived many times over, and not just once. Each person experienced many levels and degrees of existence, learning from numerous corporeal lives the reality of creation and eternity.

"Every person lives isolated and alone for many lifetimes until he or she matures enough to join together with another soul of equal maturity in a binary marriage." Ruby explained. "In other words, two women, or members of each sex, may link their immortal souls for eternity. Thus they can balance each other with their best qualities and share the unknown future together." Ruby added that only the most ancient individuals had more than two personalities bound together in an eternal binary, and Miriam had now learned that Magums who had ten were ancient indeed.

Ruby spent a little more time discussing the ninth personality within Miriam. This was her namesake, Miriam of the Shadi Betulah from Mesziah. She, broken in spirit and weary from the shock of overwhelming personal failure, had been the very cornerstone of the Nashramh foothold at Borgdragon. By willingly

initiating this monumental work, she'd redeemed herself many times over. Miriam learned none of the details of this elfin woman's failures or just what her redemption had been, but she alone had welcomed the crushing death given in those terrible walls, for she had failed in her own heart to live up to her personal expectations. It was this very failure which she condemned in herself, that Ruby and all of her sisters understood so well and drew their eternal love for her.

So, in Miriam's elfish body and mind, her namesake and other eight sisters had been given another chance, now, to experience corporeality and to live through this new entity of mind, spirit, and soul, forming the matrix of their living beings.

"You see, Miriam, your personalities are individual minds combined into a corporate entity in which all act in unity," Ruby pointed out.

Miriam pressed further since she wanted to understand this on an intellectual as well as emotional level. "But each is separate . . . why do they, or we, or I not get confused?"

Ruby chuckled, a warm laugh Miriam hadn't realized she'd missed so much until now. "All are linked together with your soul, my dear, much as threads woven together in fabric. Individual souls, like threads, form a new whole which are both separate and together in a corporate unity. Together you form a group consciousness with all participating and contributing to the whole as their individual parts allow. You are one."

"Always?" Miriam asked, wrinkling her brow. "Am I . . . or we, or us ever to separate?"

"You are in your ethereal dreams and reflections, and when you're disincarnate between life cycles. Then each personality thinks and feels separately while still joined together."

She considered what Ruby told her, mystified by much of her explanation. Focusing, she realized that Ruby had mentioned nine women who made up her temporal being, and suddenly many small, insignificant things which had disturbed her in the past, fell into place. Yet, something still nagged at her. Something was definitely missing.

"Ruby, did you not say that I am made up of ten parts beside myself?" she asked in a puzzled voice.

"Yes Miriam. Those nine individuals we've just discussed are female personalities. The tenth is male," she said, smiling. "The

male part of a Sister-Magum is absolutely necessary to her makeup, although all I'll tell you about it now is that the perspective of a male intellect is necessary to offset the nine females. Without this perspective, you could progress little further in temporal experience than you already have. Without the mix of female and male, there can be no balance."

"How has this part come to be?"

"Well, Miriam, the answer to that is twofold. If you are asking how binary souls join, then I can tell you the process takes many thousands of years. When a person matures through numerous lifetimes of experience on the path of compassionate justice, he or she becomes acutely aware of the horror of spending eternity alone. She or he comes to intrinsically know the awesomeness of creation. At this time, if one has become familiar with another person over a succession of lifetimes and has worked well with that person, they may choose to take on a binary marriage. This means they fuse together and become as one ethereal being sharing both corporeal and ethereal existence together throughout eternity. They're both individuals and one at the same time."

"Now, certain individuals who've managed to work well with their binary marriage may choose to add another closely loved individual to their ethereal being. Sometimes two females become binaries at first, and continue to add individual personalities until nine have been brought together before taking on a male. Sometimes a male and a female become a binary, after which they come together with another eight females to become a Magum. This process takes a very, very long time."

Ruby paused for a moment, but Miriam sensed that she wasn't finished.

"Now, your case is something new and special. The body your total personality now inhabits is that of an elf, which is you, who had been captured as a baby by the black ones. I'm not sure how you became diseased. Your body may have been that way when they captured you, but chances are you were an experiment. In any case, you, the elf child, had been hunted down and killed as a trophy on the children's playground, dying probably more from trauma than mortal injury. Your young elfin soul, inhabiting your body, hadn't as yet established a true identity. You merged with the soul of a special courier from our Nashramh Sisterhood who died in a nearby cave years before, and both of you, together, gave

your body strength enough to climb along the cliff wall, to the rooms hidden inside Borgdragon wall."

Miriam remembered nothing of this. "Why did this courier merge with me?"

Ruby smiled sadly. "Our courier, a male Tachalet from Thebel, was originally supposed to carry out the mission you took on. Unfortunately, he died in the cave as a result of the deadly radiation focused on the cliff by the black ones. His ethereal intellect, knowing the importance of his mission, remained near the cave and entered your body only as a last resort to carry out his promise. You were so frightened by the trauma of what you were too inexperienced to understand - violent death - and literally died and blended into the emotional structure of your mortal body. When Raphael entered, on the playground, you willingly merged with him for strength and substance, for in your innocence, you had neither.

"This part of you made it to the hidden rooms in the black wall. It became apparent that your two fused intellects were not strong enough to live much longer because of your badly diseased body, so I was forced to fuse both of you with the other nine personalities to give you strength to live on. You see, Miriam, you were our last real chance to escape from Borgdragon before we destroyed it, and I had to fuse the ten so you could unwittingly help us. You are still the original elf child who will continue to live through and with the others as one conscious being.

"And so you've become a Sister-Magum of another kind, nine women and one man merged with your innocent soul the new element. The result was born out of our desperation and need for your survival. It took the iron will of your eight sisters to keep you alive, for neither Raphael, who had been so alone for so long a time, nor you, the elf child, were strong enough on your own. The ninth, Miriam, has herself not fully awakened and adjusted to her new life, for she has withdrawn so deeply into the void of her loneliness and guilt that only the realization of human warmth and love will truly bring her back."

Ruby stopped for a moment, and Miriam assimilated this as well as she could.

"So you see, child, you are a new type of Magum and more. I can tell you this without reservation; although I was forced to fuse the others together with you without each of you having the benefit

of knowing each other well, you have pleased all of us greatly. You successfully completed two very important missions, and have up to this point, proven your self worthy to the rank of Magum."

Miriam smiled weakly.

"Before we continue this discussion, I'll tell you the first of our sisterhood's most closely guarded secrets. All who are Sisters-Magum are in continuous ethereal contact with each other through me. That means no matter where you are, or what you are, you're in subconscious communication with me at all times. This was the way we trained you for your secret mission while you were imprisoned, and how we knew the Odomaks had imprisoned you. You, yourself, told us."

Miriam nodded, but she was still confused on another subject. "Of what am I a courier, Ruby?"

Ruby smiled. "That, my dear, is our second secret. Do you know where you are and why you are here?"

Miriam shook her head. She also wanted to know how Ruby came to be here.

"When you took control over the communications center on the Eaglespawn, you transmitted me in my entirety to this place, which is, by the way, Council Central of our Nashramh Sisterhood. For you to complete your second mission from Samael-Agtren you had to be brought here. You are now the repository of my ethereal counterpart from Samael-Agtren Fortress, Sapphire."

Miriam sat still, her mind whirling. "What do you mean, your entirety?" she asked, her throat dry.

"I mean just that," Ruby countered. "I've told you that I was once human, as you are now. That is no more. While you are composed of yourself and ten personalities, I'm made up of 4,750,503 intellects. I, or we, are all of the sisters who gave themselves to the making of Borgdragon, and you were instrumental in setting us free, and sending us here. You sent more than just us here, but I'll tell you of that at some later time. You now hold Sapphire, who is made up of 3,203,844 intellects. Our sister Onyx, from Samael-Agboler, is 3,838,961 intellects. Once you and your courier Sister Keralee Simmin, who died after her mission, have been relieved of your vital trusts, then the three of us, Sapphire, Onyx and myself, will unite into a singular entity of 11,793,308 intellects of our combined sisters and more. We will all be as one while remaining as separate, individual entities. After

combining, the millions of us who hold knowledge that spans the ages, and who have had the most experience and understanding of the black ones, will in our way, be able to fight the enemy."

Miriam was speechless. It was hard enough trying to intellectually accept what she was, and compared to her, Ruby was infinitely more awesome. Her mind reeled at the vastness that Ruby represented.

Ruby continued. "I speak as one person, Miriam, but I am really each and every murdered sister from Borgdragon Estate. Because of this, I cannot take on a human body, for the energy radiated by us would overload the brain tissue in a short time. Before you go, I want you to see me in the truest way possible that I can appear to you, for the form you see now is as I looked 110,000 years ago."

With this, Ruby's human image faded from the screen and was replaced by millions of gleaming sparks that looked much like a globular cluster of stars. Her voice continued. "My beauty, Miriam, is in the pure and lovely souls of our sisters who make up my being. I, or rather we, are by no means perfection, for many of us are inexperienced in life. We do our best to make up for this by attempting to be just and compassionate, for there can be no justice without compassion, no compassion without love and respect, even as there cannot be light without dark. We've made, and still do make many mistakes, for we are not even close to knowing everything, but are only human intellects who try to pool our experiences and draw from them. We do our best to learn from our mistakes and not repeat them. We still have a lot to learn and a great deal of growing up to do, even as our sisterhood as a whole does.

"Never forget, there are more advanced beings in the galaxy and universe than us."

Ruby discussed many things with Miriam she would need to know. After she had finished, she asked the girl to enter the adjoining room. The screen faded into the rosy patterns of light, and Miriam rose slowly, stretching her cramped muscles.

She left the ruby-red room through an open door and passed into another. In it was only a low, narrow bed, on which she laid herself down.

Miriam awoke with a start and immediately noticed that she felt better than she had during the entire period after leaving Samael-Agtren. It was as though a great burden had been lifted from her

shoulders, and she felt free and alive. She knew she had completed her mission, and that the personalities comprising Sapphire were gone from her.

Her feet had gone to sleep, and she had trouble standing as they tingled and burned. An attendant entered and helped her into another room. She was given new, well-fitting clothes and enjoyed a light delicious lunch.

After she had finished, Miriam was led from the room to a waiting ground vehicle, and the attendant told her she was going to her new quarters. Miriam stepped into it.

The driver smiled broadly and said, "Welcome to Three-Stones Academy."

Chapter 18

Three-Stones

Ruby bore her only child on this once deserted world of the Three-Stones hundreds of thousands of years ago . . . and here too she became our first Magum. Now it's the hub of our Sisterhood's far-flung government where everything from affairs of state to the training of young novices takes place. Herein Miriam is exposed to the wonderful variety of our operations and the delights of training the young.

20:45-02 NASHIM 6744-6N5

Miriam's new home was luxurious compared to the ones she had occupied before. It was in a private complex of large apartments, each with private gardens and a sweeping view of the planet's listless yellow-blue sea.

The driver let her off outside her new apartment. When she walked up to the double doors, they opened by themselves. She entered into the first of the rooms, a huge living room with two couches, several tables and padded chairs, a window covering an entire wall overlooking the sea, and another wall-window exhibiting an expansive garden. This lovely garden revealed hundreds of different kinds of foliage and flowering plants, and through the open portion Miriam could smell the mixture of light scents from them.

The living room was elegantly furnished in burgundy and beige, with lovely indoor plants and pieces of exotic artwork scattered about. The bedroom was furnished similarly, although in a lighter rose and white, and held a huge, downy bed and an large closet-

bureau for clothing. Miriam smiled to herself; she had nothing to put in it.

The bathroom adjoining the bedroom had the standard sink, toilet, shower, and mirror. Miriam was delighted with the large sunken tub and variety of built-in therapeutic functions.

The kitchen held all sorts of appliances she had never seen before, and a food counter with a long list of menus pasted above it.

Most intriguing was the study, or rather private library. One wall was a large window facing the gorgeous garden, but the other walls were covered with books. Miriam first thought there were 2,000 books here, but she soon learned there were far more. They ranged from new volumes to ancient tomes in 25 languages, and covered every subject she could imagine, as well as subjects she couldn't.

Her desk ensemble was ornate in the fashion of some ancient scholar's work center, for it contained three small video-screens, keyboards, and considerable crystal disc equipment. Also, on the wall opposite the desk, there was a huge space where books didn't line it; this was a mirror screen with a light green tint.

Miriam guessed correctly that she would be spending much of her time in this room, which also had a number of living plants and curious sculptures around several large leather chairs. The entire apartment was beautifully carpeted with soft, colorful fabrics, as befitted the style and mode of each room.

Miriam was pleased with all of this beauty and luxury around her, but before she could explore further she received her first guest. A short, broad-shouldered woman, with grey green hair and a pasty complexion, walked right through the front door without knocking. As she approached, almost waddling on short, stumpy legs and pudgy feet, Miriam saw that her guest had extremely bland features, even nondescript, except for her eyes. These were of the clearest green Miriam had ever seen and were deep, radiating a blazing fire of some hidden energy. The woman's mouth never smiled, but took on odd shapes as she articulated words.

She walked over to one of the thickly padded burgundy couches and sat down. She put a flask of dark red liqueur on the low table in front of her, pulling two beautiful crystal glasses out of her robe.

The woman introduced herself in a low, rumbling voice that drawled softly.

"Good afternoon, Miriam. I'm Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor." She poured the red liquid slowly, and continued. "This, my friend to be, should be sipped and allowed to rest on the tip of your tongue. It's called Chryssenam, and is native to my home world."

Miriam sat down in a chair across from Rinim, and without comment took one of the glasses and sipped the liqueur. It did something to her tongue and activated senses she couldn't describe. Oddly enough, she seemed to taste various colors. It was exotic, delicious, and she enjoyed it very much.

Suddenly Miriam laughed happily. "This is certainly a good way to begin a friendship." She happily laughed again, the first time in a long while. "Thank you for coming to meet me."

Rinim gurgled, her form of laughing, "I beat the others out of being first, since everyone wanted to greet you at once. But, after all, we didn't want to overwhelm you after your long journey, not even with festivities. That will come later. You'll be here a long time, and will come to know everyone, so in this respect we will have adequate time."

Miriam smiled, but something nagged at her. "Rinim, do you know what I am supposed to do here? I have not as yet received an assignment."

Rinim gurgled again. "No one is given an assignment when she first arrives, for there is much to learn first. You'll do as I and my colleagues do here. You'll teach novice sisters the lessons of our order and prepare them for the future."

Rinim paused, then, continued slowly in her odd, soothing voice. "Before, you teach, though, you've much to learn about us and about being a Sister-Magum. Ruby has told us about you and your special situation, and for this, we must help you over some difficult hurdles."

"Oh."

"I'm the keeper of the ancient archives, and because of my special background, I'm best suited to answer all of your many questions. However, many others are eager to share their knowledge with you too."

Miriam listened carefully to Sister Rinim, but suddenly fatigue overwhelmed her. Rinim immediately noticed her exhaustion. "Now it's time for you to rest. I'll return later and we shall break our fast. After that we'll meet your new colleagues at the festivities."

With this, Rinim rose to her feet and, patting Miriam on her back, bid her farewell and left.

Miriam stood slowly, her legs aching, and walked to her bedroom, leaving the flask of red liqueur on the table. When she arrived at her bedroom, she lay down on the bed. As she lay thinking that it was the most comfortable bed she had ever slept on, she fell asleep.

"Arise, my dear! You have great things to do today," sang out Rinim's odd voice as she cheerfully rolled Miriam out of bed. Miriam, half asleep, stiffened in sudden shock as a horrible, explosive pain shot up her legs. She gasped out in agony.

Rinim, surprised, picked Miriam bodily off the floor and sat her back on the bouncy bed. "What on my life is this?" she exclaimed. Kneeling, she examined Miriam's legs, which hung lifelessly over the side of the bed; they were discolored from the knees down.

Rinim gently touched one of them. It was cold. She straightened, positioning Miriam so she lay nestled in the disarray of the still-warm blankets. Then she ordered, "stay right here, and don't move."

Miriam, barely conscious from the pain, vaguely noticed Rinim's solid presence, but when her head cleared a little, Rinim was gone. Perhaps it was a real dream, but in her mind she kept hearing Rinim's worried voice saying, "stay right here."

Miriam trying to shift herself a little, felt once again the angry pain consuming her legs, and whimpered. Even the creeping paralysis had not been this bad.

For what seemed an eternity, she floated on the borders of unconsciousness, experiencing delirious dreams that seemed to last for hours, though they lasted only seconds. Through all of them, she dreamed an undertone of paralysis, but she was unaware that her legs were throbbing with burning pain.

Rinim went directly into Miriam's study, since all of the Magum apartment complexes were similar. Moving quickly to the ornate desk, she activated its comm-unit.

"Q1161," she said hurriedly into the speaker.

"Yes, may I help you?" a soft, soothing voice came from the comm-link.

Rinim recognized the voice. "Manaco, please come to MBM1251 immediately. I have an emergency." Rinim spoke out clearly and quickly. "And summon an emergency unit."

"Yes Rinim."

Sister-Physician Manaco Greise responded immediately after she turned off her comm-link. She passed on the information to 'EAU' and personally headed for the unknown apartment, which her locale board showed to be some two kilometers away.

Rinim returned immediately to Miriam, who still lay on the bed. Her eyes were half closed and she was perspiring heavily. Rinim shook the barely conscious girl by the shoulder, and Miriam's head cleared a little.

"Miriam, listen to me. There's no circulation in your legs below the knees, and your feet are black," Rinim announced as she gently probed the blackened area for perforations and signs of poison. Then, finding none, she began a procedure of gentle, yet firm, massage which would induce blood flow without endangering the tissues and arterial systems.

After only short moments, Sister Manaco and three medic-unit technicians entered. Rinim briefed the doctor on the situation while Manaco made her own check, probing gently and using special instruments to scan Miriam's legs.

"It's gone too damn far," she said sadly. Then she turned to the med-techs and ordered, "take her to Emer-unit 26-C. I have to get to this immediately."

Throughout this transaction, Miriam laid half conscious on the soft bed, vaguely aware of the cool hands caressing her lower legs. She looked up at the ivory ceiling, and suddenly it seemed to open and she sensed, rather than saw, a huge, endless void that threatened to engulf her. She struggled to keep alert, hearing distant voices. Was she still in the freighter, escaping from Phodden Morg and dying of paralysis? She tried to speak, but only a low whimper came out. She dimly felt Rinim's cool hand on her hot forehead.

The med-techs moved with practiced precision immediately after the order, gently placing the flushed elf on a wheeled litter and administering a mild sedative. Then, within short minutes, they raced her to the Emergency Operating unit.

Miriam awoke slowly, coming to brief consciousness and then losing it to blackness, only to slowly rise into consciousness again.

Her head felt as if it was stuffed with cotton, and her mouth was incredibly dry. Oddly, her big toe itched, but she couldn't move to reach it.

She opened her sticky eyes, and her vision slowly focused. She saw Rinim and another woman standing by her bed, watching her closely.

"We almost lost you," said Rinim, her funny pasty face close to Miriam's. "If I hadn't had plans for you today, and gone to get you up, the stoppage would have gone too far."

Miriam tried to assimilate Rinim's words.

"I'm Sister Manaco Greise, the chief medical doctor of this facility," said the other woman, clearly articulating her words. "You are now in my hospital ward."

"Wha . . . what has happened to me?" mumbled Miriam through thick lips.

Manaco paused slightly, then, answered. "Your legs or, rather the nervous system in them, has been damaged by some means unknown to us. This damage caused a condition wherein the circulation of blood was impaired," Manaco spoke softly, soothingly.

Miriam nodded. She knew this already.

Manaco continued. "When you were discovered, your lower legs had no blood circulation in them, probably not for many hours. Gangrene set in, and was spreading fast. By the time we got you here to our Emergency Operating Unit, we had no choice."

"No choice for what?" Miriam asked slowly, an icy panic beginning to grip her.

Rinim exchanged glances with Manaco, and slowly stroked Miriam's pale brow. "Be calm now child. Your mind and body are together," she said softly. "Now, look into my eyes, and know my soul."

Miriam fought to control her rising panic, knowing that whatever was done could not be changed. If only her head would clear.

She looked straight into the deep green eyes that opened themselves to her, seeing haunting faces so alien and beautiful.

"You already know we had to remove your legs at your knees," Rinim whispered in her strange, soothing voice. "If we could have saved them, no effort would have been spared. But, we had

absolutely no choice, if we were to save your life. You're too important for us to lose, for we need you here, and now."

Miriam remained in the hospital ward for three weeks after her operation, although she felt like going home after two. During her stay, she received daily exercise and therapy sessions from Sister Marim Tinnia, a swarthy creature who heard nothing Miriam said and took no nonsense.

Marim rehabilitated Miriam with the standard Nashramh self-conditioning exercises which Miriam herself had practiced as a daily regimen for many years. But when she told her instructor this, Marim ignored her and continued to supervise the sessions anyway. Miriam discussed the matter with Manaco, who laughed heartily. "Look, Miriam, in this matter I stay away. This is her territory and she does it her own way, the way she knows to be successful."

"I understand this," said Miriam, "but I am capable of performing the exercises in private."

Manaco laughed again. "Miriam, I know you have extraordinary self-discipline, but Marim has heard every excuse and ruse there is for sick patients to use to get out of therapy, and this probably sounds like one to her. Don't take it to heart; she ignores all patients equally."

So Miriam continued her therapy sessions with Marim Tinnia, and to great success. Busy in her therapy and other lessons, she never had time to wallow in self-pity for her lost legs.

By the beginning of the third week, much to her surprise, the scar tissue on her legs had healed effectively. She was still not thrilled about looking at the awkward stumps, but Manaco comforted her.

"If we had known about the condition when you arrived, we might have been able to do something," she said, shaking her head. "But anyway, you'll be receiving two pairs of prostheses in a couple of weeks. You won't need them before then, since your flesh will still be tender. I want you to be well-healed before moving around."

Miriam agreed wholeheartedly. She didn't want a repeat of the creeping gangrene. Before she was released from the ward in the third week, Manaco subjected her to a thorough examination, wanting no surprises. Once Manaco diagnosed everything as

satisfactory, she released Miriam from Tinnia's bondage and sent her home.

Miriam lay propped up on her downy bed, surrounded by masses of fluffy pillows. Her live-in nurse, Hilirim Hinnu, had wheeled her into her apartment and sent her directly to bed to rest.

Miriam was restless. She felt almost too pampered, for she had been waited upon and told to rest at every opportunity when not in therapy and lessons. She glanced at the unopened book in her lap, and chose a page to read. It was a tome of sensitive love poems from a far away world, written by a poet long since forgotten except for this eloquent testimony.

She read quietly until her nurse, a soft-eyed Kelphean girl, announced she would prepare lunch.

Miriam glanced up, nodded and then returned to her book. She was still reading when another woman entered. Noting the feel of a different person in the air, Miriam quickly looked up.

"So, you're Sister Miriam, so nearly lost to us. I'm Sister-Magum Mee Amod, the first of your invaders. You see," and the dark woman smiled, "you're to be set upon by an army of Magums who are eager to meet you."

"Ah, yes," said Miriam. "This is my welcoming party!" She smiled broadly to herself, remembering Rinim's promise on her first day. "Sister Rinim mentioned it for the day after my arrival."

"Yes, but Rinim has had this place quarantined ever since," Mee agreed, "and she has a way of controlling things."

The two women chatted for a few moments, and Miriam found Mee to be witty, charming, and as likable a companion as the funny Sister Rinim, although in a different way. She was tall and stocky, with long hair and a mannish figure. Mee also had an angular face, which was softened by deep violet eyes and a slow, beautiful smile. Within minutes, they felt like old friends.

Several more Sisters-Magum began to trickle in, coming to a dozen in all. Each confirmed Rinim's quarantine and made little jokes about it. Obviously all had a special place in their hearts for Rinim, and all respected her.

They entered Miriam's room alone and in pairs, each bringing her own specialty recipes, even the ones who didn't like to cook. The foods were simple, yet exotic in that they came from strange worlds, worlds that seemed ancient, yet were not well-known.

All of the Sisters-Magum impressed her with their friendliness and radiant youth, but two seemed almost familiar. One was Sister-Magum Medinah Gats, a very feline woman from the dry, cold desert world of Tziah. The other was Sister-Magum Orth Vert, a woman from an uncharted rimworld that had long fought the black ones' influence.

Rinim entered last, bringing several liters of liqueurs for the crowd to enjoy. The sisters decided that since Miriam couldn't come out to the living room, they would hold the party in her bedroom. Several sat on the edges of the huge bed while others dragged in chairs or sat on the soft carpeted floor.

It was a good party, full of saucy jokes and farfetched stories of past lives and adventures, especially with men. Miriam suspected many of these stories bordered on true confessions, and enjoyed them very much. She became aware of one thing: all of the Sisters-Magum loved to relate stories about men they had known, and it was obvious they cared about them as she'd loved Ben.

She also learned about life on several worlds she'd never heard about before. One of the sisters even told her a little about one of her visits to Mesziah, and Miriam came to learn more about the innocence of her own race.

As they talked, everyone ate. There was a multitude of foodstuffs, and each person had a little of each, which tantalized them with subtle and bold aromas and flavors. Miriam's nurse, Sister Hilirim, refused all liquor, but ate enough for at least three people.

Miriam thoroughly enjoyed her party and becoming acquainted with the Sisters-Magum with whom she would work in the future. Several called her child, although she didn't know why. She also told them a few of her own adventures that were not extremely private. At the end of several hours, she was close to these women, who were all so different, yet all similarly experienced and wise. She felt as close to them as she had with Ruby, Vargo, and Heline before them.

Miriam was rarely alone during the next few weeks. Her live-in nurse spent hours listening to music with her or reading aloud, and Rinim was at the apartment so much of the time she might as well have moved in. Miriam never had a chance to become depressed about her loss. She was grateful for the support of the

two, as well as the many visits by other Sisters-Magum who came to share their knowledge and experiences with her.

A couple of weeks after the party, Manaco came to visit with a large package containing two pairs of false legs. Upon opening it, she squeaked in surprise, for they looked and felt so lifelike that she chided Manaco for jesting with her.

"Jesting? These are the real things!" laughed Manaco, delighted at Miriam's reaction to her new legs.

Miriam soon learned just how comfortable and lifelike the prostheses were. They blended easily with the color of her skin, showing only a nondescript line above where her knee should have been. They fit perfectly, which Manaco told her resulted from a cushion that was actually a living plant which gave in to pressure while remaining soft and pliable. Miriam's body perspiration was compatible with the plant's strange metabolism, thus removing the cause of skin irritation and damage to her flesh.

Miriam learned to use these new legs as if they had been her very own, and in no time was walking and exercising with them. They literally became a part of her except when she was in bed sleeping, in her bath, or when swimming.

One incident particularly bothered her, though. One afternoon she had dozed off while sitting on her couch, and she awoke to feel her ankle itching. Half asleep, she bent down to scratch it, and after a few moments of vigorous scratching, she realized she was wearing her false legs which had no sensation in them. Later she laughed about the incident with Manaco, but at the time the strange sensation confused her. Long after her operation she felt her legs itching or hurting her, although they were no longer there.

"Well, Miriam, I have a surprise for you. The severed nerves in your legs aren't dead. In fact, they're being stimulated by neuro-sensors in your artificial legs and being attuned to the legs' bio-modular systems, which will make it possible for you to feel your new legs as if they are really a part of you. Sometime when we have a few days together, I'll explain molecular engineering to you."

Manaco was right. After she had worn her artificial legs for several months, the sensations became less intense as they were transferred to the neuro-sensors, making everything feel natural.

The Academy of the Three-Stones was ancient. It received its name in the remote past, it was said, before Ruby left. It was Ruby,

and two other Keepers of the Sacred Stones, who founded it. Legend had it that the Nashramh had four such academies; all founded by three 'Keepers' were something more than just training schools. Each was built on uncharted worlds hidden out along the rim of the galaxy, and through various methods, their locations were kept unknown to all, especially the servants of Samael.

The 12 sisters who founded these academies had each taken on both the name and characteristics of one of the sacred stones, and subsequently departed on a mysterious quest known only to a few. Each, when her quest was completed, would return to one of the designated academies to bring about a fundamental change to the sisterhood. This change could begin only when three of the sisters joined together in a holy bond based on each of the three ruling principles of Eternal Justice: compassion, love and respect for all living entities. In all, four sets of three 'stones' would comprise the foundation of a new era for the sisterhood. This would change even the structure of the binding force of the sacred order, the Sister-Magum.

What this change would be was unknown, but it was said among the Sisters-Magum that the bonds of the past would be broken and an eternal unity, long sought for, would be forged in an equality steeped in experiences transcending mortal pride and overcoming evil. An ancient soul would emerge as a red thread coursing its way through the white fabric of the Nashramh's composite dimensions, and would draw together the receding past and the oncoming future. It would be the mirror through which the dimensions of past and future would intertwine in a vision of eternal destiny.

This long-sought-for eternal unity and the red thread which would mirror a vision of eternal destiny remained an enigma to those who knew of the riddle, since the legend kept secret the identities of its components. Hence, no one knew who, or what, the unity would be with or the exact meaning of the red thread as it was described.

Through learning of this riddle, Miriam came to understand a little of Ruby.

During the following century, Miriam taught young girls the fundamentals of Nashramh lore, galactic languages, and a variety of specialized subjects, many she'd learned at Borgdragon. Whenever she was asked by one of the bright-faced novices about

the legend and riddle of the Three-Stones and The Red Thread, she told the girls all she knew. She didn't profess to understand the intricate details of it, but somewhere deep in her mind she knew she held the answer to the riddle, although it always eluded her grasp.

Her many conversations with Rinim and the other Sisters-Magum helped her to understand her own strange nature and also disclosed the building blocks of the sisterhood. She learned that the growth of a Magum intellect from a single intellect usually took a minimum of 40,000 to 50,000 years.

She also learned many more details about her own exceptional case. She was in fact more than a whole Magum personality but without the requisite experience or wisdom inherent in the real process of normal development. The only reason Ruby fused nine intellects to her, the elf-child, and the Tachalet with whom she'd merged at Borgdragon, was because the sisterhood desperately needed a corporeal courier to transport the millions of trapped sisters from that vile fortress, and the weak and diseased little creature which had been Miriam was all there was.

During her century at Three-Stones Academy, Miriam received a fundamental education to introduce her to the realities she would face in time, but she was still indeed an immature Magum, the equivalent of a child. All her component personalities were young in experience, and the original, traumatized intellect was only a baby and unproven in the wisdom of compassion, love and respect.

It was for this reason that Miriam, the elf from Mesziah, was assigned for an indefinite period of time to live and work at Three-Stones Academy. She was to have a long period of learning and adjustment, a process that could be achieved only by actual temporal experience and testing.

Three months into the first session of her third class group of incoming novices, Miriam became aware that one of the girls, a Sister-Novice Fenn Filton, seemed lost and lonely. The girl, a small and delicate child with large black eyes, soft tan skin, and dark red hair, timidly came up to her one day after instruction. She spoke to her teacher about her complete lack of self-confidence and fear of failure, and asked if she could have a private audience to adequately explain herself and receive guidance from such an experienced personage as Miriam.

An appointment was set in Miriam's quarters in two days. Somehow Miriam never really agreed to it.

Miriam thought about the matter of Sister Fenn that evening; something seemed subtly wrong. She shook her head, thinking she was imagining things, but the doubts still nagged at her. How could a girl who seemed so 'unsure', be so bold and sure of herself while maneuvering her way into an appointment? She couldn't have been lacking confidence.

Miriam was so uneasy about the matter that she discussed the problem with Sister-Magum Yan Kestle, Three-Stone Academy's Chief of Security. Miriam noted that somehow, something seemed wrong, something she couldn't put her finger on.

Yan sat back, noting both the suspicions and the manner of Sister Miriam, who presented them. She considered the matter for only seconds, deciding it would be worth looking into. Nothing was too unimportant for the security of this academy.

The following day, Sister-Novice Fenn Filton strolled quickly towards Miriam's quarters, humming a sweet tune, when she met two older sisters going the same direction. They were very friendly and seemed to really care if she was happy and doing well at the academy and what she was interested in. But, she was just a child compared to these two incognito security officers who were experts at obtaining information. Before she knew it, she had inadvertently told them the black ones didn't know where the academies were, but that they did exist. For this reason they had inserted 1,000 specially trained girls into the pre-novice program on the chance that one of them might be assigned to one of the academies.

Somehow, Fenn came to understand their line of questioning, disinterested yet probing, and self-triggered a device buried in her brain. She died almost instantly, but first murmured, "My Sweet Lord Sargon, I've failed you."

After she was dead, the security agents recovered her gamma-B and shipped her corpse to a forensic laboratory for a special examination. They found she carried an unknown make of poison projector and a gold chip of unique design and composition. She was, without a doubt, an assassin sent by the black ones to avenge the destruction of Samael-Agtren Fortress. They had apparently identified Miriam as the infiltrator through the Odomaks, who'd seen both the medical chip from the Sisters of Orb and the pictures of Miriam and her Borgdragon tattoo.

Sister-Magum Yan Kestle informed both Ruby and sisterhood security about the other girls, whom they ferreted out and interrogated before they could inflict any damage on secondary targets.

Miriam continued teaching at Three-Stones Academy for another 16 years, during which time she was carefully guarded. Each novice was thoroughly checked and accounted for, not only at her academy, but at all the others.

At the end of this time, Miriam abruptly received a new assignment, and her place as an instructor turned over to another Sister-Magum.

Miriam was thoroughly interested in her new assignment, although she wasn't thrilled about having to leave the academy, which she accepted as home. During her briefing on the subject, Ruby informed her of the disproportionate numbers of sisters lost to the enemy or abandoned on backwash worlds while serving with the Odomak forces, especially with their navy. The Amalgamated Cooperation Mutual Defense Treaty was due to expire, and would be renegotiated at Tristan III in 11 years. Ruby assigned Miriam to act as the Sisterhood's Chief Negotiator, Ambassador, and Authorized Signator.

Apparently Council Central, and the Sisters-Magum specializing in galactic treaty affairs, suspected that large numbers of black ones had infiltrated the Odomaks. This wasn't too difficult because of the Odomak's extreme biases, which the enemy manipulated. With this in mind, the sisterhood no longer felt either prudent or safe in renegotiating the treaty with them, especially concerning the War Powers Pact of the Amalgamated Cooperation Treaty #2116.

Miriam found one disclosure of particular interest. According to sisterhood intelligence sources, the Odomaks were desperate to renew the treaty, but were stupidly altering its contents.

In short, the Odomaks detested the Nashramh, but needed the sisterhood's superior intelligence services.

Miriam would appraise the situation firsthand, then make the final determination. She would also receive sisterhood guidelines for negotiating the 427 other treaties in the Galactic Common Confederation's and the Sisterhood's best interests.

Miriam would leave in five days, traveling for two years in a sisterhood warship before transferring to the Starliner Supreme

G.C.C. 'Blueworld'. She would spend another eight years on the luxury liner.

After her briefing, Miriam returned to her apartment and began to prepare for her journey. She was unhappy about leaving this place and the people she'd grown to love and respect. This would be the end of the most wonderful and rewarding part of her life. She would miss it, but all good things had a price.

Two days before her departure, Miriam invited all her friends to her home for a farewell party. It was as enjoyable and as memorable as her welcoming party and all who'd been there were at this one, as were many others she'd met during the years.

In fact, to say she'd called all her friends was wrong. They all began dropping in, invading her apartment at the same time like an army. Some left poems, songs, and other little mementos of their friendship. All were unhappy to see the child go, for she had so much to learn. They hoped she would be ready to meet the challenges she'd have to face in her uncertain future.

Chapter 19

Treaties

As other commentators have noted, there are plans within plans . . . especially in the universe of politics. Miriam learns more about the nature of both allies and enemies alike . . . and the benefits of long-laid plans. . . .

04:00-27 BENEM 6881-6N5

The Nashramh scout freighter 'SF Ginger Rose' dropped into the sub-binary, making for the transfer coordinates beacon RG40633R, where she was scheduled to meet the G.C.C. 'Blueworld' in approximately 23 months and five days. The Nashramh Treaty Negotiating Team NB61-7T had already boarded at 04:00 hours and retired immediately to their private quarters.

Two Sisters-Magum and five sisters from Treaty Analysis Group Headquarters made up the team. They traveled without baggage or armed escort. Each was armed with a fiber laser, undetectable by customs on the Blueworld, and carried all of her possessions in her medium-sized black handbag, which always remained on her person.

Miriam spent all night prior to her departure in a final tactical review and operational briefing, and was now fatigued. After sipping a little of the spicy liqueur Rinim gave her, she laid down on the cabin's bed and immediately fell asleep.

The other Sister-Magum on the team, Sola Frey, also retired to her quarters for rest. She sat tiredly on the edge of her bed, brushing her long blonde hair and thinking about her short exposure to Sister-Magum Miriam. The elf carried her self well, and

was particularly special because she was one of the few elves in the sisterhood. This innocent race was still too childlike to become an active part of the Nashramh, and only those few elves who had been off-world residents for many generations showed any adaptability to the order.

Sola looked at herself in the mirror screen as she luxuriously brushed her hair, not really noticing her reflection as she thought about the mission at hand. She was a tall, distinguished-looking Odomak woman with hard grey eyes and a large Odomak nose. She had commanded more than 100 commando raids into enemy territory, and was none the worse for wear. She had also been the Governor-General on the large grey world of Thesuluan IV and served four terms as Sister-Governor of the Halasonian Quadsystem Confederation of Rim-worlds. For the past three centuries, she'd directed the Nashramh combined fleet operations staff as a senior admiral, and was an undisputed expert on G.C.C. joint operations. These impressive achievements and natural abilities had made her Council Central's choice as a senior member of the treaty team.

Sola was especially interested in Odomak naval performance, which was an enigma to most observers because of their boldness and efficiency. Their prowess unsurpassed by any other navy, remained matched only by Odomak losses of Nashramh intelligence personnel, which was epidemic.

Sola sighed to herself. Sometimes she felt ashamed to be an Odomak, although she was from the beautiful world of Eretz, and not Odomah like most of the navy's mainline personnel. She concluded that the Odomak Navy suffered from two maladies: a foolish disrespect for the lives of the Nashramh sisters assigned to it, and obvious infiltration by Jerdens from the Black Legions. This deadly trend had now become unquestionably obvious.

Now she was assigned to the negotiating team as Military Affairs Advisor to Sister-Magum Miriam B'Meszhiah, whom she knew to be young, but also well-suited as Chief Negotiator. She had been briefed on Miriam's strange past, and was impressed with the tenacity of this fledgling Magum. She also sensed that Council Central had other, unrevealed, reasons for assigning this, as yet, untried Sister-Miriam to this mission, possibly to smoke out the Jerdens who were hell-bent on revenge over the death of Sweet Sargon. She truly looked forward to working with Miriam, who was

known to be a tough little elf, not to be easily fooled by diplomatic platitudes.

Sister Aby Tran, the director of the treaty analysis team, lay on her soft bed trying to sleep. She was responsible for the accurate review of all treaty provisions and interpretation of documents for each of the Nashramh's treaties. This task required an expertise and specialized knowledge of all the Galactic Common Confederation's laws, customs, and cultural norms. She was well-versed in all of this, possessing great amounts of knowledge that would stagger the imaginations of the uninitiated. Aby and her team had worked with these treaty affairs in separate careers for no less than 500 years each, and were well-educated in galactic relations and law towards which they had devoted the majority of their careers.

All five had served in military and intelligence assignments as well, for this was required for all sisters and gave each an understanding of the risks faced by all intelligent creatures in this long and costly war of attrition against the black legions of the invading enemy, Samael.

Aby mused over her short glimpse of the young Sister-Magum Miriam B'Meszhah, with whom she would now be working. She and her team members had been briefed about Miriam and knew about her background at Borgdragon and Agtren Estates as well as her brief experience with the Odomak Navy. They, however, had never seen Miriam before and couldn't anticipate how she would conduct herself among professional diplomats and negotiators.

Aby smiled to herself. She was curious to see how Miriam would respond to all the pomp and ceremony of the various embassy dandies.

The two-year voyage to the rendezvous point was uneventful. The treaty negotiating group worked long hours each day reviewing each treaty with Miriam and Sola. The five specialists came to respect Miriam's grasp of basic principles and her ability to work well with the team. She certainly was no prima donna, and obviously enjoyed working closely with others. By the time they reached the Blueworld, all had confidence in Miriam's technical understanding of treaty affairs and her ability to work closely with them in serving the best interests of both the Nashramh Sisterhood and the G.C.C. component governments.

The transfer to the G.C.C. Blueworld was uneventful, and the seven sisters arrived with the same possessions they had when they came aboard the Ginger Rose. They took up residence in a modest compound at the edge of one of the vessel's beautiful parks. This was opposite the Odomak compound, since they wanted to stay as far from the Odomaks as possible. Fortunately, the Odomak negotiating group wouldn't board the Blueworld for another seven years.

Till then, the sisters kept to themselves, working hard and only leaving the compound in groups of twos or threes for exercise or recreation in the park. They took all their meals together in the compound, and fortunately there was a wide variety of things to choose from. Miriam grew to enjoy these meals greatly, for the seven chatted leisurely over them about many diverse subjects.

They made every effort to keep a low profile, working long hours in their small complex on each of the 427 treaties. Miriam found that seven years of treaty review was hardly enough, for she had barely scratched the surface of all the nuances associated with all of the various different documents. In fact, some of the language groups were beyond her grasp, and she came to rely totally upon Aby and her team for accurate interpretations. She made it clear to Aby at the beginning that the treaty analysis team had sole responsibility for establishing treaty parameters and that she would agree to nothing without their full consent.

By the end of the seven years, which passed swiftly, the sisters had developed into a close-knit group and each had learned to trust the others without question. They worked together so well, they seemed to make up a single organism. The few remaining details would be ironed out before they reached Tristan III, which would be in another 13 months, but no one anticipated problems here.

Odomak security patrols surveyed the entire park area and the residential complexes surrounding it for any signs of enemy activity. Numerous lists and intelligence data were ferreted out about every living soul in the designated area, including shipboard maintenance and operations personnel; Odomak Security was taking no chances on possible assassination attempts.

The chief of security, Commander Hascam Cazin, was sitting at his desk when his receptionist buzzed him on his comm-unit. His

Security Information Officer, Lieutenant Verey Rehin, awaited an audience.

"Have him come in," Cazin instructed.

Within seconds, Lieutenant Rehin entered and stood at attention in front of Cazin's desk. He saluted, and after Cazin returned it, the lieutenant handed him a thin file containing two information discs.

"Commander, this is all the information that I and my men in Section D42 could find on the Nashramh representatives."

Cazin nodded briefly, put the file on his desk and asked, "will there be anything else, Lieutenant?"

Rehin hesitated only seconds. "Yes sir. I feel my people were unable to find adequate information on the sisterhood delegates."

"Is that information in this file?"

"Yes sir."

Cazin frowned and sat back. After a short silence, he said, "I thank you for your concern. Put your top men on it and get all the information you can." He knew the young Lieutenant had done this already. "And, unofficially, you may have to use slightly unorthodox methods to get it. Do what you must. But remember, Lieutenant, we didn't have this, er . . . conversation."

"Yes, sir." Rehin saluted briskly, and left. If he could find something especially useful to the old man, well, perhaps he might be recommended for a promotion.

Cazin tapped his fingers on his polished desktop, thinking. This Nashramh Sisterhood was extremely exclusive, and he didn't like it. He shook his head to himself, then decided to review the disc on the sisterhood delegates.

The information wasn't fruitful. There were only seven members on the negotiating team, obviously only a small segment of the entire sisterhood contingent. There was absolutely no identification of their chief negotiator, who was registered merely as NB617. Each of the team members was registered by first names only, but no other information was available from regular sources, since the women kept to themselves and didn't fraternize with either the crew or passengers.

Cazin was disappointed at this lack of information, but soon his attention turned to other quarters.

By the end of the week, Cazin was rewarded with a more fully developed profile of the elusive sisterhood negotiators. Lieutenant

Rehin presented him with an additional file, which positively identified one of the team members. This was a Sister-Magum Sola Frey, who was accurately identified through photo cross-checks. She was known to be a powerful force in the sisterhood's combined military operations planning staff, possibly a senior admiral.

Cazin slapped the file down on his desk. Surely, she must be their chief negotiator. But why was there no more information? He still had no idea how many persons were in the entire hidden sisterhood contingent. These seven couldn't be the only members.

The other six sisters appeared to be five technicians and one off-breed, possibly acting as an orderly to the rest, or in some technical capacity. Some shipboard personnel had seen the off-breed opening the compound door and greeting whomever was there. She appeared to have some sort of eye disorder, since she wore dark glasses and cotton under one lens.

Cazin realized no new information about the sisterhood delegates could be gained unless they offered it. So, declaring the area safe and secure, he lifted the tight quarantine over the Odomak contingent. This permitted their 210 men and women to move freely in a clearly designated area within the park adjacent to their compound.

The chief authority of the Odomak treaty negotiating group, Admiral Unger Roydel, sent special protocol officers to each of the G.C.C. delegations to present his formal greetings and to exchange information on the upcoming negotiations at Tristan III. One of these, Fleet Lieutenant Caden Ora, called on the Nashramh contingent at exactly 09:00 hours on the morning the Odomak quarantine was lifted.

A small woman greeted Ora, wearing dark glasses with cotton behind one lens. She bowed politely, speaking in a childlike voice. "Good morning. May I help you?"

Ora appraised her, and said crisply, "Yes, I wish to speak to Sister-Magum Sola Frey." He hoped the identification was correct, and continued coolly, but politely. "Is she available? I'm Lieutenant Ora from the Odomak Treaty Delegation."

Then, with a smooth and practiced movement he whipped out his hand-engraved protocol card and handed it to her.

"Come in, please," the girl smiled, stepping aside and bowing.

Ora quickly surveyed the room, noticing an aristocratic appearing Odomak woman entered without having been

summoned. He knew from the intelligence photos that this was Sister Sola.

Sola appraised the Lieutenant with her hard grey eyes, noting his dandified grey uniform. "I'm Sister-Magum Frey. What is it you want here, Lieutenant?"

Somewhat startled by her cool reception, Ora got straight to the point. "I've come to exchange negotiation notes with you, your Excellency. If you will begin by accepting our proposals, we'll await your responses."

Sola looked at him, smiling to herself at this handsome young man's audacity and boldness. "So they send a junior lieutenant to slap us in the face, eh," she thought to her-self.

Ora smoothly handed her a book-sized document bound in deep purple velvet, the gold Odomak Eagle crest emblazoned on its cover.

"We'll accept no such proposals or notes until we arrive at Tristan III," she answered softly. "You may return the document to your ambassador. Have you any further business with us, Lieutenant?"

Caden Ora was shocked that this tall Sister-Magum, an Odomak at that, would treat him and his delegation so tactlessly. Bowing, he spoke clearly, controlling his tone at a friendly tenor.

"As you wish Your Excellency, I shall carry your response to our chief negotiator, Admiral Unger Roydel."

With this, he again bowed, then turned and left without any show of emotion. After all, he was a diplomatic agent. Still, he seethed with anger at her treatment of him, and he had to force himself to be pleasant to those he passed on his way back to the Odomak compound. "The old man will blow a gasket over this one," he mumbled to himself.

After the girl had closed the door behind the smooth-talking, seemingly imperturbable diplomatic agent Sola turned to her. "My what a clever disguise, Miriam. Cover your eyes, and you become obscure."

They both laughed and returned to their labors. They took no further note of the miffed Lieutenant Ora.

Admiral Roydel wasn't pleased by Sister Sola's response to his Lieutenant's overtures. Turning to his nephew, Captain Juger Roydel, he muttered, "So the old bitch is announcing she'll only deal with our top dog, and on her own terms. Don't hold your

breath on this one. They'll probably hold out until the last minute so they can squeeze us for some concessions."

Juger smiled. "I'm curious to meet this great Sister-Magum. She must be a tough old bird. She's an Odomak aristocrat, after all."

The old admiral considered this for a moment. "You know, I'm going to have the dried-up old crow sit right next to me at our reception dinner, or better yet, right across from me." He paused for a moment. "You, my boy, get one of the others."

After this brief exchange, the two Odomaks returned to their strategy for organizing the diplomatic reception dinner, in which all the top personnel from each treaty delegation would be present. It would be held during the Festival of Galactic Unity, in ten days.

The dinner arrangement was a splendid affair, and would be held in a major ballroom adjoining the Odomak complex. All senior diplomats and negotiators, and their consorts were being invited by name, and all would attend the prestigious occasion. The total number of guests turned out to be 4,697 dignitaries, including the Sisterhood contingent, and elaborate preparations had been made for dinner and entertainment.

All sisters were invited, since the Odomak Protocol Office had no information as to who was who in their negotiating team, and they wished to offend no one.

All invitations were hand-carried and delivered by protocol officers, who verified each recipient, except for the sisters who wouldn't respond to name verifications.

As the groups of guests filed into the giant room through one wide double door, Odomak protocol personnel verified their identities with their personalized invitation cards. The guests exchanged pleasantries as they were shown to their tables. Beautiful dainty red velvet cards bearing hand-printed names in the guests' own respective languages sat at each place setting.

The Nashramh delegation arrived during the preliminary festivities. Although greeted often, the seven sisters generally kept to themselves. They found, as expected, that they were all assigned to separate tables. Sola was seated directly facing Admiral Unger Roydel and Miriam found herself sitting across the table from the attractive and friendly Captain Juger Roydel.

Miriam sat placidly at her beautiful place setting, fascinated by the gala affair. Everything and everyone glittered and shone. The

host's table sat strategically at the head of the great banquet hall, directly in front of the long wall covered with the Odomak banner. This was deep purple velvet, with the Odomak crest, a golden eagle, stitched in rare gold threads. In the distance, Miriam could see Sola sitting across from their smiling host, Admiral Roydel; Sola was speaking to another person next to her.

Miriam looked around at the guests. They were all dressed in their finery, the men in uniforms and insignia, and their lovely consorts in splendid gowns and extravagant jewels. All were elegant beyond description. Only the Nashramh Sisters weren't elaborately attired; each wore their simple black uniform of jumpsuit, long skirt, short jacket, and polished boots, and the black beanie on her head. In this uniform, Sola appeared to be a powerful dowager with her age-lined long face, Odomak nose, and steel-grey eyes. Yet, despite the simplicity of her attire, there was no doubt she held great authority and power.

Miriam, with her dark glasses and the cotton behind one lens, appeared as an obscure nobody amid all this pomp and grandeur. The uniformed men and their ladies didn't seem to notice this, each greeting her with the same respect as they greeted one another. Miriam was impressed with this attitude, and upon further reflection, realized they were the elite of the professionals. The glitter didn't really matter to them, since it was only for show. They never judged anyone by appearance alone.

Captain Juger Roydel took his seat as the last of the guests entered. Now he studied the woman across the table from him, noting her manners were exquisitely practiced and elegant in a manner unfamiliar to him, but reeking of sophistication. He amiably introduced himself to her. "I'm Captain Juger Roydel. I'm afraid I don't know your full name. Is it just Miriam?"

The girl smiled modestly and answered. "My friends call me 'Shorty', but I do not think that would be appropriate here."

Roydel paused to consider this, then inquired, "do you always wear dark glasses in public, or did you hurt your eye?"

Her answer was straightforward. "We had a malfunction on one of our compu-units, and I received deep lacerations around my eyes, coupled with radiation damage. The cuts are covered with skin-colored plastifoam, but my eyes cannot now sustain direct light without further damage. The right eye has been burned more deeply, so no light is to touch it."

"You certainly get to the point," Juger laughed. "You would make an excellent negotiator."

Miriam replied promptly. "My superiors expect direct and concise answers that are straight to the point. Sisters-Magum do not like long, drawn-out accounts."

"Ah, yes, just like our senior officers," Juger smiled. Then he noticed a waiter beside him.

The waiter whispered discreetly in his ear. "Captain Roydel, the Admiral wishes for you to escort someone, whom he refers to as an off-breed, out of this room immediately. Do you understand who he means, sir?"

Juger's mouth tightened a little. "Yes," he replied. "I'll take care of it."

The waiter left, leaving Juger exasperated. He had done some tough things in his life, such as killing enemy forces in hand to hand combat and burying his own dead in makeshift graves, but his uncle's latest request turned his stomach. Somehow, it didn't seem manly.

Well, orders were orders, to be obeyed without hesitation. Juger could ask questions later although he was sure the answers would be reasonable and well-thought-out, as they always were.

He slowly rose. Miriam was chatting amicably with her neighbor, oblivious to his action. Excusing himself to the lady on his left, he walked around the table to Miriam's chair and whispered in her ear. "Pardon me, Miriam, but would you please accompany me to the lobby? I wish to speak with you privately."

Without hesitation, the girl picked up her black purse and followed him away from the main table and through the door. She understood exactly what was happening.

Juger Roydel stopped and faced the small woman, saying, "I'm sorry, but. . . ."

"Don't be," she cut him off. "I'm leaving now," and without looking back she walked past the guards and out of the room.

Juger was speechless for a moment, then, stepped through the doorway to follow her and press his apology. It was obvious to him that she knew what was going on.

When he arrived in the large hallway, she was out of sight. Frowning, he sighed and returned to his seat at the table, now facing an empty chair.

Sister Sola knew exactly what Admiral Roydel asked the waiter to do when he'd moved directly to the nephew. She gave the emergency signal to Miriam, who understood it and quietly left.

Throughout the proceedings, Sola continued her discussions of trivia with the jovial admiral, as if she'd noticed nothing at all.

Miriam was not seen by members of the Odomak contingent during the remainder of the voyage. This was fine with her, for she remembered Roydel from the Cardinel with unpleasant thoughts, and had felt no desire to attend the reception dinner in the first place. She'd simply accepted the old admiral's dinner invitation as a matter of professional courtesy.

She didn't go directly to her compound, but traveled instead to a preplanned safe haven in another complex, some 15 kilometers away from the Nashramh complex. She moved swiftly through narrow and safe passages, arriving unhindered at her planned destination. Here she was greeted by Sister Imada Agah, a mousy-looking woman who seemed to blend with her surroundings.

Imada was a specialist in covert surveillance and assassination techniques, and was presently serving as a maintenance person at one of the park complexes.

Her room was simple, but comfortable, and more than adequate to house the two of them. It was equipped with the economy-style shower and cooking facilities, much as were the lower class staterooms.

Sola and Miriam had already worked out a plan for the elf's escape if any sign of danger were to appear like the event at the Odomaks' reception dinner. Miriam, because of her special status as the only one to escape from Borgdragon, was a prime target of the black ones. She would remain in Imada's room for the remainder of the voyage, since she and the other sisters suspected the Odomaks might have identified her, and that her expulsion from the dinner was part of an assassination attempt. In any case, Sola thought it best to keep her location a secret, and staying with Sister Imada would accomplish this.

Not unexpectedly, Imada was happy to have Miriam as her guest. She was hungry for the companionship of a fellow sister.

"This kind of assignment is a lonely business," she confided to Miriam. "Because I must keep a low profile, I miss the warmth of real friends." She paused for a moment, trying to find the right words. "In this job, it's as though I'm exiled. Whenever I see

someone I recognize as one of us, I want desperately to go and hug her, and say 'don't forget that I'm here too.' But I cannot. In this job I have to be a grey nobody who lacks personality or intelligence. It's an excellent cover for my specialty, but a boring one. I can't even consider publicly recognizing another sister much less enjoy the pleasure of her company."

Miriam agreed wholeheartedly. She understood loneliness as well.

For nearly a year, Miriam stayed with Imada. She spent much time studying and exercising, while Imada filled the rest with tales of her own experiences.

Miriam thoroughly enjoyed the long witty stories and unique insights expressed by her friend, who was a treasure house of information about the ways of galactic travelers. They spent many hours discussing these, and Miriam was so fascinated by Imada's accounts that she took up the task of learning as much about them as she could. The insights might come to be useful one day. She would know if someone who traveled in the guise of an Odomak really was an Odomak.

When the G.C.C. Blueworld broke into temporal space for the transfer of passengers and cargo to waiting freighters, Imada escorted Miriam through obscure maintenance tubes to the waiting Nashramh transfer shuttle, the 'Crenuukune'. They went unnoticed and unrecorded by way of a special envoy entrance port.

The trip aboard the Crenuukune lasted 28 days, and during the trip, Miriam remained alone in a hidden room loaded with all kinds of odd weapons and surveillance devices for the Nashramh sisters. There was a self-contained food counter and bathroom facility, both cleverly hidden in the ship's structure.

Miriam kept herself busy during the 28 days by sleeping, meditating and exercising. The days flowed swiftly for her, and before she knew it, the Crenuukune reached Tristan III and had broken into temporal space.

Miriam left everything as she found it. Imada had taught her special codes to work out on the single key-board outside the hidden room, and when she punched out one of the short codes, special compartments concealing the toilet, shower, bed, and food counter opened for her use. When she left, she applied the second code, which re-concealed the secret devices.

With her black purse slung over her left shoulder, Miriam departed the ship through the same entrance she had entered. She left unnoticed, but was met at the edge of the dark launch pad by Sister Chau Smay, who was attired as a maintenance technician. Chau sent Miriam a subtle hand signal when she spotted her, and Miriam cautiously returned it. They made their way to a maintenance garage, and left the spaceport in a delivery vehicle shortly after midnight.

It was too dark for Miriam to see any of the surrounding countryside. Everything was shrouded in a dense fog, which gave the illusion of unreality to the road ahead.

"Our embassy is made up of four buildings," said Chau. "One of them is a stable for riding Treps, which are two-legged animals commonly used on this world. They're adaptable to the cold temperatures of our winters, and work especially well during the rainy season."

"The embassy is 230 kilometers from the spaceport, and 16 kilometers from Sistelany Castle, where the treaty conferences will take place."

Miriam couldn't see much, even when the dim moon rose high in the sky, but the air had a good, earthy smell. It was too bad that she couldn't stay here for a few years and experience this population's way of life first-hand. Everything here felt good.

An hour before sunup, they finally reached the embassy. After a thorough security check, embassy guards passed them and they drove over to the gatehouse garage. They were met there by Sister-Magum Kim Navin, a dark-brown woman with long, aquiline features and eyes that were like exquisite dark almonds. She towered over Miriam by at least two heads and was impressively beautiful, with a deep, musical voice.

"Sister-Magum Miriam," she said in beautifully toned notes. "I'm so happy you arrived here safely. So many black feelings have permeated the air for several months, and I suspect they bode some hidden danger for you during your stay."

Miriam bowed, smiling, "I seem to have a habit of attracting those types," she sighed. "It must be my charming ways and my lovely voice, no?"

Both laughed, more from relief than humor, and entered the embassy's main building. It was mammoth, an impressive stone structure with marble columns lining the front. The interior was

simple, yet elegant and plush with a wide marble staircase leading the way to the upper level floors.

Instead of taking Miriam directly to her new quarters, Kim took her to the embassy recreation area, which was located in a large enclosure behind the main building.

"The others won't be here for another three hours," she told Miriam, "and I know you've been shut up alone in the Crenuukune for a month. I think you could use a good swim and a hearty breakfast before they arrive. We can either use swim suits, or skinny dip if you wish."

"What do you prefer?" asked Miriam with a laugh, remembering Rinim's persuasive ways.

"Well, I consider bathing suits to be vanity pleasing pieces, like jewelry," Kim confessed. "On my home world, we're free from false modesty and love the feel of cool water against our bodies."

"You speak for both of us," Miriam agreed.

The two entered the large pool, Miriam having first removed her false legs. Kim was surprised. "Were you wounded by a land mine?"

Miriam shook her head, and told her of the ordeal on Phodden Morg. Kim nodded in understanding.

After a long swim, they took a leisurely breakfast of local food products, which were hearty rather than exotic. Miriam, thoroughly enjoyed the refreshing swim, and had a healthy appetite for the satisfying meal. Then Kim took her to her new apartment to rest before the remaining six members of the negotiating team arrived.

During Miriam's long absence, Sola and the other team members completed their review of the treaty proposals with the exception of the Odomak's, which they refused. Few changes were requested in the existing treaties, and these consisted of minor 'housekeeping' details, which the sisters rapidly agreed to. When Miriam later examined these treaties, she came to the same conclusion. Only the Odomaks had been successfully infiltrated by the black ones. All the other Common Confederation negotiators were satisfied with the existing treaty conditions and performance.

Sola and the other technicians arrived at the embassy at 10:18 hours, and were immediately escorted to their own quarters adjoining Miriam's. All sensed an almost tangible danger in the air, as had Kim, but no one seemed to know exactly where it lay.

Within two weeks of their arrival, the Nashramh delegation approved all 427 different treaties submitted to them. Miriam signed and sealed each of the treaties with the sisterhood seal by the end of the third week, six months before the scheduled end of the conference. She did so without the usual ceremony and time-consuming discussions that flattered egos without expediting matters. This, in a way, showed that the good relations between them and the Common Confederation's member systems hadn't suffered in the past five centuries since the last conference.

Unfortunately, the relations between various confederate systems weren't as smooth as those with the Nashramh. This had been expected by the various delegations that arrived at the conference. In fact, six months of final negotiations was hardly enough time while they rehashed much of the preliminary work until making some agreement.

With all of their documents signed and sealed by all parties concerned, the sisters shipped them by a special courier craft to Council Central. Only the Odomak treaty remained undone. The remaining sisters turned their attention to other matters. The team's four treaty specialists had returned to Council Central with their signed documents, leaving only Sister Aby Tran in case the Odomaks had a change of heart and attitude.

Once alone, Miriam, Sola, and Aby began a long process of evaluating the Odomaks' transmissions and reviewing their conduct during negotiations with other confederation members. A clear picture came to light, concerning the Nashramh Sisterhood. The Odomaks retained good relations with every one of the negotiating teams, with the exception of the sisterhood. This convinced Sola that the Odomaks had been infiltrated by the black ones.

This strange picture also revealed that the black ones were making an all-out effort to avenge the destruction of Gensargon and his three estates. They had been badly hurt and were retaliating in all ways possible for their major setback. The Nashramh had, of course, no way of knowing just how badly they damaged the enemy, which was of so alien a culture that such secrets could hardly be ferreted out. Judging from these extreme efforts to avenge Gensargon, it must have been very badly. Miriam described her own experience with the enemy to Sola during one of their early conversations and noted that, "success against Belial

always carries a heavy price." This was additional evidence which confirmed her thesis.

During her six month stay on Tristan III, Miriam often visited the Trep stables, sometimes riding one of the gentle beasts around the embassy grounds. She enjoyed giving the Treps a good workout, but even more, she enjoyed visiting her favorite Trep, which she named Amber after her soft amber eyes.

Amber, like most of the two-legged, chunky riding Treps, was fond of bitter chocolate, and Miriam often made special trips to the stables to give her a few chunks. At these times, near dusk, she would pat the gentle beast, then sit down in a warm corner of the stable and think about Ben being here with her. At times like these she missed his warm touch, and his bold humor and warm companionship even more.

The treaty conferences neared their end with the approach of the cold autumn season of Tristan III. Even as the leaves of the tree-laden Nashramh Embassy turned from various greens to dusky reds, yellows, and browns, the Odomaks made no effort to contact the negotiating team. The sisters didn't travel to Sistelany Castle during the conference for safety reasons, and so remained at the embassy as the final days wore on.

During this tense time, life was generally leisurely and enjoyable. Sola and Miriam prepared contingency plans for abandoning the embassy, just in case of treachery or an open attack. The embassy staff had other hidden facilities in the world's northern wastelands designed for just such an emergency. The three negotiators, especially Miriam and Sola, were obvious targets for assassination.

In preparation, a Nashramh scout destroyer, named 'SD Gale Robel', landed secretly only 500 kilometers from the embassy, on the far side of a range of high mountains. She was on a round-the-clock standby for an emergency takeoff. Also, the embassy had hidden a medium-sized transport four kilometers from its perimeter, and 10 camouflaged ground skimmers were hidden behind the Trep stables. All the Treps were moved to another location for 'grooming' until matters were settled. Everyone could easily escape to the Gale Robel, the three negotiators off-loaded, and the transport on its way to the embassy's secret quarters in a moment's notice.

On the final day of the conference, Admiral Unger Roydel came to the conclusion that the Nashramh treaty team was playing hard to get, like a 'virgin with a panting lover', as he put it. They were waiting for him to come with hat in hand. His chief-of-security reported that they had signed the other treaties very early in the conference, with the exception of theirs.

"Admiral Roydel," Cazin urged, "If we don't get this damned treaty signed by tonight, we'll be left out in the cold. It's obvious they won't come to us, so we must go to them and make a deal at all costs. We need the damned bitches."

Roydel nodded his head in agreement. "You're right, Hascam, as always. And you know that I'm the only one the old crow will talk to," he continued tiredly, and his thin aged-lined mouth drooped. "I'll take Juger with me, and play her girlish game."

Roydel's chief-of-staff made an appointment with the Nashramh Embassy for 13:00 hours that afternoon, and the two Roydels arrived promptly on time. A Nashramh woman in a grey uniform ushered them politely down a long hall. Juger glanced around appreciatively recognizing the corridor as a search-and-scan facility which screened for weapons.

The silent woman ushered them into the recreation area, where Sola and Kim sat by the pool in Nashramh uniforms, drinking tea and chatting.

Roydel strode towards them. "Good day, Admiral Frey," he said, saluting smartly. "I've brought my government's treaty proposal for your review and consideration."

Sola remained seated, appraising the two tall naval officers coldly. "It's very considerate of you to visit us here, Admiral Roydel," she said softly. "And what do you expect from us?"

Coolly, but calmly, Roydel placed the purple, velvet-covered document on the table in front of her. "I'd like you to read this, and to give me a response so I may report back to my government."

Sola looked at the document for a moment, then, extracted a long pair of thin tweezers from her short jacket. Using them, she opened the book. She glanced at each page for only a few seconds before turning to the next, until she had finished.

"You've read it?" Roydel asked, astonished at her speed as well as insulted by her use of the tweezers. Did she think he would stoop to touch-poisoning her?

"Most certainly," she answered coolly. "You've made only three changes to the previous provisions. First, we're to station only Odomak sisters on your commercial vessels and 'off-breeds' will not be accepted on your warships. Second, any so-called off-breed sisters are to be transported on your grade III freighters only, and in the steerage quarters. Third, the sisterhood is to pay for all quarters and provisions for all assigned personnel, at rates to be determined by your Quartermaster General." She paused a moment, then said coldly, "so, now that I've read it, what do you want from me?"

Roydel stiffened inwardly, but remained cool with iron self-discipline.

"Juger, would you please leave us alone for a moment?"

Juger nodded, and walked over to the pool where several lovely young women were playing in the water. He smiled amiably, watching them.

He saw Miriam by the pool's edge hanging on to a rung of the shiny ladder. She wore no dark glasses, so at first he didn't recognize her. When Miriam smiled at him, however, he recognized her. "Hi," he smiled.

In the meantime, Roydel addressed Sola shortly. "Admiral Frey, I didn't come here to play little diplomatic games with you. You apparently understand our proposal, and I'm asking for a response so I may advise my government."

"Admiral Roydel," she toned softly. "You would do well to learn the art of diplomacy. Now," she paused slightly, "if you desire an official response to this document, you need to deal with our chief negotiator."

Roydel's eyes nearly bugged out. Surely, Sola was in charge? Quickly scanning the area, he saw no one else that could be capable of the position. Hell, what a mess!

"Who, may I ask, is this chief negotiator?" he responded, fighting to keep control of his tone.

"She is Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah."

Roydel raised his eyebrows. The name told him nothing. "May I please see her?"

Sola turned to the pool, and speaking clearly, said, "Sister B'Mesziah, Admiral Roydel wishes to speak with you and also for you to review and respond to a treaty proposal he has so kindly delivered to us."

Immediately, two sisters appeared as if out of nowhere, bodily lifting Miriam out of the pool. They carried her to a chair at the table and handed her a soft towel, with which she dried herself and her scant lavender bathing suit.

Noticing the shocked expression on Juger Roydel's attractive face, she said, "Come now, Captain. Have you never seen amputated legs before?" She then covered the stumps with a damp towel.

Admiral Roydel ignored the amputations, too shocked by her strange eyes and the Borgdragon tattoo on her right forearm. Controlling himself, he said, "Pardon me, Your Excellency, but I hadn't been properly informed of your identity, and therefore mistakenly delivered this document to Admiral Frey. Please forgive me."

Miriam nodded shortly, enjoying watching him squirm; then she was reminded of her own shortcomings by some unconscious memory. "Most certainly, Admiral, I take it you wish me to review this document now?"

"Yes Your Excellency," he replied. He was aggravated that this off-breed was lording over him. He was sure she was the same off-breed he'd imprisoned on his ship, the Cardinel, and had caused him problems with the admiralty many years ago. He would verify this with Cazin.

Miriam picked up Sola's silver tweezers, adjusted the book with them, and leafed through the pages just as Sola had. When she finished, she leafed through them again, this time backwards, recording them for Ruby.

When she had finished completely, she looked up and saw the old man staring at the tattoo on her right forearm. Ignoring this, she spoke.

"I'll consider this proposal tonight, and you may inform your government I will respond at 11:00 hours tomorrow. May we assist you further, Admiral Roydel?"

"No, your Excellency," he responded, saluting and excusing himself and Juger.

Once outside the embassy grounds, the old admiral said, "Juger, I've been outthought and outmaneuvered by that old crow and off-breed. You can bet your life that I won't let it happen again. Tomorrow we'll get that treaty signed even if I have to make love to them to get it."

Juger nodded in agreement, but inwardly he mused about his uncle's attitude. Of course he would never be outmaneuvered by these sisters again, for the Odomak government would probably remove him from its diplomatic circles for bungling this treaty negotiation. Gad, if he had not been such a stubborn and bigoted old man.

The moment the door closed behind the two Odomak naval officers, the two security women who had pulled Miriam out of the pool immediately came forward and picked her up. Another retrieved her false legs, which were out of sight. Then everyone, with the exception of Roydel's security escorts who'd left already, moved directly for the escape vehicles located behind the Trep stables. With Miriam's Borgdragon identification exposed to the old man, something would surely happen. The only question was when. They left the purple velvet-bound treaty document on the table, since it was possibly part of a trap.

Within three hours, the entire group approached the SD Gale Robel, and the three negotiating team members transferred aboard. Kim Navin and her staff were well on their way to the northern wastelands and their secured quarters when the Gale Robel lifted out of the planet's atmosphere into open space.

The scoutship continued at minimum power until it reached a stationary orbit 20,000,000 kilometers from Tristan III. Sitting motionless, everyone waited to see what would happen. At exactly 03:00 hours, Comm-Sec and CIC picked up a confusion of transmissions from the distant planet, which revealed that the Nashramh Embassy had just been destroyed by a low-yield nuclear explosion. Sola and Miriam glanced at each other and shrugged. The black ones were present in force on Tristan III, for only they were fanatic enough to openly attack such a small facility with a nuclear weapon.

The sisters also knew that the Roydels hadn't engineered the detonation. However, because of their pride and uncontrolled biases, Jerden infiltrators had used them to avenge the destruction of their three fortresses.

Admiral Roydel couldn't believe the report Odomak Naval Security sent to him during his sleep period. He felt that it was obvious the bomb destroying the Nashramh Embassy had been definitely made and planted by the black ones. The damn thing was loaded with heavy metals which were poisoning the entire area

around the crater. Apparently there were no survivors, since no one was seen to either enter or leave the compound after the Roydels drove away.

"Unless we can convince the Sisterhood that we aren't part of this, we're without a treaty and their intelligence information for a long time," Commander Cazin said weakly to Roydel. "I think we're in a great deal of trouble."

Roydel nodded in agreement. Somehow, he mused, someone close to him must have known when they left before destroying the embassy. Why and by whom?

Cazin continued. "Incidentally sir, I checked that odd tattoo for you. It correlates with the tattoo on Lieutenant Miriam B'Meszhiah on the Cardinal as you suspected." Cazin paused for a moment thinking to himself, "I do believe we got the vile murderer of Sweet Sargon," and then scratched the back of his neck.

The Admiral nodded in agreement. "I really blew it there. I never could comprehend those off-breeds, or figure out what they're good for."

"She's probably the only exception," Cazin replied. "In all my years of experience, they've all been unreliable, cheats, whores, saboteurs, and spies. I've never met one that could look you in the eye and tell you the truth."

"That's also my experience," agreed Roydel, who wondered just how he was going to get out of this mess with the damned Sisterhood.

Miriam and Sola jointly transmitted their reports to Council Central, and received permission to return to the Academy of the Three-Stones on the Gale Robel. At exactly 03:30 hours, the scout destroyer dropped into the sub-binary, heading for the first leg of a circuitous route to their base world.

Chapter 20

Captured

I've been around for a very long time . . . 300,000 years with our Nashramh Sisterhood and 3,000,000 years earlier with my own race of origin. Still, I've never encountered anything like PARRSOOVOOV, nor had anyone else until she captured the SD Gale Robel and altered the ship with our three Magums aboard. . . .

02:30-26 TALUM 6892-6N5

The SD Gale Robel was a standard Nashramh Class I fleet scout destroyer with a complement of 35 officers and technicians. The vessel measured 600 meters in length and 100 meters-wide at her stern. She was tapered from her stern to her bow, like an arrowhead, to a rounded nose measuring five meters in diameter. She stood 30 meters at her stern.

This scout destroyer was designed for specialized raids into enemy territory. She could sustain uninterrupted voyages in the sub-binary for eight years, traversing 32,000 light years without taking on provisions. Also, she could land and take off virtually unnoticed by enemy radar, since her hull was covered with a specially charged nonmetal skin and since she operated on low-impulse drives. Prior to landing on Tristan III she'd been on patrol for four years and two months.

Sister-Magum Yanna Jun, Captain of the Gale Robel-Zee for 73 years, had engaged in 46 deep penetration raids. The Gale Robel limped back from more than one, once so badly damaged that she had to be picked up by a larger Nashramh warship, but Yanna and

her crew always kept her together. This was only a sideline event in her long career, and she looked forward to the long rest.

The three sisters from Tristan III were assigned quarters in the special assault team billets, next to sickbay. The quarters were simple, but comfortable, with the standard fixtures. Once aboard, the Magums chose to remain alone until 03:35 hours. Emerging only after the warship dropped smoothly into the sub-binary.

Aby Tran didn't remain with them, but instead made the rounds of the ship shortly after her arrival. It was obvious to her that Captain Jun enjoyed her job and felt almost a kinship to her ship which she gladly displayed.

Aby briefed the captain in full on the events which occurred back on Tristan III. Several odd emotions crossed Yanna's face as Aby spoke about the Odomaks, but otherwise she remained silent and without expression.

After she'd finished, Aby paused a moment.

"Sister Captain Jun, my two companions must be excused for their absence. They have other . . . more urgent business to deal with, and can't make it until we reach the sub-binary."

Yanna laughed. "Say no more. They must attend to their own priorities." As a Magum herself, she knew what the 'urgent business' was, although Aby didn't. The Sisters-Magum were in communication with Council Central, probably reporting the chain of events on Tristan III.

Yanna was right. In Sola's quarters, the two sat together in a deep meditation, communicating with Ruby, and through her, to Sister-Magum Kim Navin back at Tristan III. During this communication, both Miriam and Sola learned of the destruction of the Nashramh Embassy, long before it was broadcast over the intragalactic communications network. Kim had, before leaving, activated special monitors within the embassy and for an area of some ten kilometers away. These monitors, each linked with the emergency embassy, told her the whole story. They monitored, analyzed, and transmitted the magnitude, spectrometer readings of the sudden atomic blast to her, and through her to Council Central and to Miriam and Sola.

Miriam and Sola quickly came out of their meditations after Council Central dismissed them.

"Well, that says it all," sighed Miriam. "Unfortunately, we were right. Now it's a new war game."

Sola agreed, and looking into the wall mirror before her, absentmindedly began to comb her long blonde hair. She sighed, for she had much thinking to do and too little time in which to do it. Now what was going to happen?

After a few minutes of rest and reflection on their communications with Council Central, the two emerged from Sola's cabin, wearied of war, yet refreshed by their discussion with Ruby. Both were pleased by their plans to return to Three Stones Academy, especially Miriam, who had good memories of her life and friends there.

After a few moments, the two reached Aby and the captain. After Aby introduced them to Yanna, her crew and security people, Yanna gave them the royal tour of the Lovely Gale Robel.

Miriam stopped dead in her tracks.

She saw Alsis, the obese woman she'd seen fried on the frying pan floor at Borgdragon, squeeze her way through the wardroom door! Miriam stood for scant seconds with her mouth open in mute shock, memories of the woman's hideous torture clamoring into her mind as if they were freshly happening.

She caught herself immediately. Almost. She realized this wasn't Alsis, but a member of the same race who was almost identical in appearance. She saluted the woman and announced, "I'm Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah, one of your three refugee passengers."

The heavy woman stood still for a moment, stunned by the look she'd seen in the little elf's strange eyes. It was a haunted look, almost murderous. She blinked her small eyes, and saluting smartly, replied, "I'm Sister-Commander Ulsa Rubenel, the ship's navigator. It's good to meet you, Sister Miriam."

The tour of the ship resumed, without further incident, ending at their cabins. "The officer's mess will be serving breakfast, at 08:30," Yanna smiled. "I'd like to join you three, all right?"

"Certainly," Sola nodded back, the other two concurring with smiles. Miriam already felt hungry.

Miriam entered her quarters and removed her beanie and jacket when she heard a soft knock on her door.

"Come in," she called out.

The cabin door slowly opened, revealing Commander Rubenel. The woman silently squeezed her way in with a look of something between concern and hurt on her pudgy round face.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" asked Miriam formally, somewhat puzzled by the woman's odd countenance.

"Please forgive me Sister Miriam," replied Ulsa in a soft voice which contained a wary tone. "I have the distinct feeling I've said or done something that has seriously offended you, and I wish to resolve the situation."

Miriam had no idea of what she was talking about. "I don't understand, Commander Rubenel. Just what has brought you to this conclusion?"

Ulsa stood still for a few moments, her small, soft eyes blinking. She seemed to be squirming and fighting with herself as to what to say.

"When I entered the officer's wardroom, you gave me a look I cannot describe. I had a terrible feeling of something about me being dark and horrible. Whatever it was, your look was directed at me . . . and hurt me deeply, almost as if I had said or . . . or done something terribly wrong."

Miriam sat down on her bed, suddenly feeling as if she'd been slapped. "I . . . I did not realize . . ." she murmured, her voice trailing off. "I am afraid that you saw something you should never have been subjected to."

Miriam waved Ulsa over to a couch across from her, and then continued. "You, my dear, dear sister, have done nothing at all to offend me, "What you saw for a brief moment was . . . a glimpse of Hell." She sighed. "When I saw you, I recognized you as almost a twin of a dear soul, a sister and courier I encountered while I was imprisoned at Borgdragon Estate, nearly three centuries ago. Her name was Sister Alsis Jeffnel, and it was she who first taught me what our whole sisterhood is made up of . . . of sacrifice, loyalty, and a bravery beyond description. It was through her determined loyalty and terrible death, which I can never dismiss from my conscious mind, that I learned of the strength unseen that sustains we humans in the Nashramh through our ceaseless struggle to bring dignity and justice to light in the face of Samael's tyranny."

Ulsa understood something of this, for she saw the interplay of emotions cross Miriam's face and heard the tremor in her voice. She was only confused as to why she had seen a specter in Miriam's stare.

Miriam noted her confusion, and continued slowly. "With her death, I never again shed a tear, for she represented to me all who suffer and die at the hands of the black ones without surrendering their sacred trust. My friend, Sister Ulsa, what you saw is something I cannot forget, and the very thing that can make you my friend."

Ulsa was overwhelmed, but she understood that something here was horrible in its very being. As she sat quietly, looking at Miriam and blinking her soft eyes, the elf slowly rolled up her right sleeve, displaying the discolored tattoo.

"My sister Alsis wore one like this on her right forearm when she died a horrible death burning on a red-hot metal floor. By her death, she escaped her tormenters. She escaped them, but I did not. I was witness to her torments and agonizing death and the vision of it haunts my consciousness to this day. She won . . ."

Miriam paused, then, abruptly continued.

"Please, my friend, do not ever disclose what you have seen and heard today to anyone, for it is personal, only between the two of us."

Ulsa nodded her head, understanding completely. Although she had never been a prisoner like Miriam, in the past she'd watched helplessly as her friends died from terrible wounds. She'd seen natives from primitive worlds dying horribly with the prayer, "success, Sweet Sargon," on their quivering lips. She also knew something about the intensity of Miriam's emotion as the elf recalled the incident, and blinked away tears which, although she was very sensitive, she knew would never help.

Ulsa gulped. "Thank you, my friend Miriam, for telling me of this. It takes a load off of my shoulders, although it has added a new one as well."

Miriam nodded. Then the two new friends continued to talk together, and Miriam learning a little about the world from which Ulsa and Alsis had come. They became fast friends that day on, for not only did Miriam have an affinity towards Ulsa because of her resemblance to the sensitive Alsis, but Ulsa also had an affinity to this elf with the odd deep eyes that spelled deep mysteries.

The officers' mess was at one end of the wardroom, with a line drawn on the deck between it and the crew's mess. A sign on the bulkhead, painted by some unknown artist declared, '*somebodies*'

on one side and, '*nobodies*' on the other. The nobodies, it turned out, were the officers, and the some-bodies were the crew.

The three refugee sisters sat down in the partially filled eating area for a pleasant meal. As they ate, Yanna discussed the organization of the ship's routine, joking: "as you can see, we at this end of the room amount to nothing more than mere passengers who. . . ."

KSSNAPPP!

The Gale Robel lurched, sending plates of partially eaten food flying and everyone on board sprawling to the decks. The lights blinked out and the ship's drives immediately ground to a screeching halt.

For a few seconds there was complete silence. Then a low hum sounded somewhere as the mechanically and chemically driven emergency equipment came to life. A klaxon shrilled in the distance, followed by another in the mess area. Then the shrill sounds abruptly cut off.

Everyone lay stunned in the dull glow of the red chemical lights. Miriam, wondering what had happened, raised her head up a little to look around. She couldn't distinguish the identities of the bodies sprawled around her, which were subtly illuminated by the smoky red light.

In all parts of the Gale Robel, people tried to get their bearings. A single question formed in each mind: what could have caused them to stop in the sub-binary?

KSSNAPP KRRRUNNNK!

The ship quivered with another sickening lurch, then bucked again as if she was trying to tear herself apart. Yanna's voice rang out over the open audio-link.

"General Quarters! Damage reports on the double!"

People began moving about as soon as they heard her voice, trotting to their battle stations without colliding as each knew her job and acted with precision.

Yanna Jun was all business. Looking at the stunned Miriam, Sola, and Aby, she said, "I think you'd be safest in your quarters. Please go there now."

Sola readily agreed as Miriam nodded slowly, and the three cautiously made their way down the long passages until they reached their quarters.

Yanna headed for the bridge, which was filled with the hazy red of the chem-lights. Yanna assumed her command chair, and over the audio-link a voice rang out.

"Deadman Switch activated!"

Engineering had damage reports immediately. "Everything has shorted. We're dead in the void."

The bad news continued as each section made their reports. Commander Rubenel's voice rose above them all, "Captain, we're blind! I can't even get a starfield on the opticals."

Yanna murmured, "How's that?" looking into the optical periscope herself and slowly pivoting it around. All she could see was eternal blackness, "Nothing."

She returned to her chair and thought quickly. Never, but never, had a ship been stopped in the sub-binary before; it was unheard of, and theoretically impossible. What could have done it, a Samael ship? Can they be that advanced and powerful?

Yanna had no idea, since there were no starfields in sight, not even the warped version seen in the sub-binary; the opticals must be malfunctioning, but how? They showed no signs of physical damage, and Commander Rubenel rechecked them three times. Yanna could conclude only that they were somewhere besides the temporal and sub-binary planes, but where?

"Gunner, fire a spread of ten beacon flares 30 degrees off port bow," she ordered. They released them within a few seconds of the command, lighting up the port side of the Gale Robel. The flares were clearly visible through the optical periscope, but nothing else but blackness showed.

"Fire one torpedo canister at two degrees off port bow," she continued. Released, the torpedo traveled at a speed of 100,000 kilometers per hour. Fifteen seconds later, she saw a gigantic flash as the canister detonated, obviously hitting something. The bright light briefly exposed an endless grey wall. Then there was darkness again.

Yanna plopped back into her command seat with a low sigh, her eyes wide with shock. The ship was in dead silence, except for the soft purr of the chemically driven gyros. No one dared to guess what it was they were trapped in.

The gunner fired another torpedo canister aft of the starboard side, which detonated eight seconds later.

"Well, that makes our fore and aft limits about 644 kilometers apart," said Commander Rubenel, her voice expressing disbelief.

Yanna's fingers absentmindedly tapped on her knee. Frowning, she ordered that torpedo canisters be fired directly to port and starboard, above and below the ship. Each one impacted at different times.

"What does that make it?" she asked.

"Roughly 236,000 cubic kilometers," Rubenel replied, awestruck. "It's a big box, yes, just a big box."

The torpedo canisters along with their atomic detonations elicited no response, and the Gale Robel continued to hang motionless in the darkened box.

Miriam lay on her bed, trying to contact Council Central, but somehow failing. Relaxing her concentration, she wondered just who or what their captors were. Could this box be some sort of cargo bay on a giant battlewagon from Samael's hidden empire?

Her head had been feeling odd ever since the ship stopped; now she became disoriented for a moment. The room spun and took on distortions she couldn't describe in any way except as being wrong. Not just wrong, but **WRONG**. The angles suddenly seemed so wrong that they made her feel uneasy, and she also felt a sharp tug at her subconscious.

Miriam shook her head to clear it. Within seconds, the horribly odd sensation was gone. Her heart pounded as she remembered the brief glimpse into a distorted image of some strange reality, and she closed her eyes from the vision. The odd distortion made her extremely uneasy, for the room, it must have been her room when she'd looked at it then, had been - All Wrong. She couldn't describe just what was alien, but the oddness of the room's angles and lighting and very feel for that instant of disorientation struck her with a nameless terror. It was something she couldn't fathom and didn't wish to.

Sisters-Magum Sola and Yanna also felt the subconscious tug at their minds. It lasted a matter of seconds, then, was over. Sola sat meditating, and Yanna had been staring into the optical periscope when it happened to her. For only a split second, she had a glimpse of the inside of the box, then nothing. All she told

Miriam and Sola was that, "this box had no reason, no right to be in our universe. It was so alien to my senses."

* * *

PARRSOOVOOV checked her instrument probes which displayed readings and colored images of the miniature spacecraft. That is what it appeared to be in her estimation, though compared to her own tiny fighter-craft, it looked like a home for microscopic insects.

Its primitive devices appeared to be shut down. The little craft had emitted ten dull flares and then six nuclear flares in the classic sign of peace, which told her she'd picked up a spacecraft instead of an attractive space-jewel.

She could detect only three intelligent life forms on the ship. But each had an odd anomaly that she couldn't put her finger on. Thirty-five other low-grade consciousnesses registered onboard, but they were too weak to show as other than primitive pulses. She suspected they were probably drone males used to satisfy their mistress' lusts while on their journeys through the void. Her own drone males weren't much brighter, but each did have one redeeming quality; his mating organs were in constant readiness for her nocturnal needs.

PARRSOOVOOV felt curious about the three intelligent life forms which were female, and briefly considered bringing them aboard. Then one of her officers noted the small ship appeared to be altering its basic structure and deteriorating from their sub-energy fields. PARRSOOVOOV immediately decided to expel the tiny vessel, since it didn't seem right to detain sister females from their travels, even if they were miniature primitives. Thus, after mere moments of study, she ordered the miniature vessel released back into the sub-spec, then continued on her way.

* * *

The Gale Robel suddenly found herself floating free in open space, with magnificent starfields surrounding her. Yanna, still feeling odd after her brief disorientation, wondered how they could have come back into temporal space without having been vaporized. Their return to temporal space from the sub-binary

required an intricate process utilizing the proper drives, which to her knowledge they hadn't used.

Of course, no one was sure they'd left the sub-binary, for although the starfields were as clear as those in temporal space, she couldn't recognize whether they might be in a different, and unknown, shade of the sub-binary. After all, no vessel had ever stopped in anything but temporal space. Or, if they had, none had returned to tell about it.

Who, or what, captured them, remained a mystery to all. To add to their dilemma, no one knew where they were. The ship's mechanical chronometer, which continued to operate during the brief encounter, indicated that they'd been held in stasis for exactly two hours, three minutes and 26 seconds. Now they were floating in totally unfamiliar space, and nothing registered on their visual charts.

Yanna listened halfheartedly to the damage reports. She was getting a bitch of a headache. It turned out that everything on the ship was out of whack to some small degree. The organic fluid computer had remained intact throughout the strange ordeal, but would have to be reprogrammed because of the strange static readings filling its memory banks. This process would take about six weeks.

The entire electrical and power supply systems grid also needed work, and would probably be operational again in three to four months. Somehow, everything had been shorted in them, although they'd automatically shut down during the entrapment.

The main problem, Yanna found out after a half hour, was that the Gale Robel's main computers and sub-binary drives were completely inoperative. Nothing had actually been damaged, but every single part was slightly out of synchronization. All the gold work had to either be built up or shaved down, and this alone would take years.

Yanna shook her head to herself. Whatever stopped them in the sub-binary had sure given them a hell of a problem. It seemed as if everything was rearranged in a number of minute ways to somehow suit the features of the alien box, although she couldn't understand why she had this impression. Everything in the Gale Robel was changed to a degree of an alien nature reminiscent of her glimpse of the box around them earlier.

Yanna's head throbbed, and she dimly wondered what in hell did this to her ship. If it was the vile forces of Samael, the enemy had a great weapon against them. If it wasn't. . . .

Whatever happened, it changed her ship by some alien degree. Now the question was, had it changed them too. And, could they get back home again?

She noticed Commander Rubenel looking at her strangely, and she slowly stood up, her head vibrating with thick waves of sharp pain. "I'm going to my quarters for awhile," she said, with an effort. The pain in her head increased. "Let me know if anything else happens."

Miriam and Sola, in their separate cabins, were also developing throbbing headaches. Miriam tried to contact Council Central before it got too bad so she could report the strange occurrence, but she couldn't get through, and didn't know why. The headache pushed all thoughts aside for the time being, and she crawled into bed to try and sleep.

After six weeks the organic fluid computer was in operation, but it couldn't recognize any of the surrounding stars or constellations. Commander Rubenel programmed it to consider how the various star groups around them were situated and how they would look from the opposite direction, then, went to pour herself a cup of well-deserved spice tea. She was especially concerned about the computer results, for her only problem was to locate just where it was they had come from so she could navigate the ship back.

At her request, the helm left the Gale Robel in exactly the same position as she'd come out of the box into open space, and facing in the same direction. She didn't want to lose track of where she thought they'd come from, and even the slightest movement of the vessel's heading could send them in some other direction as far away from the original spot as they were now. There would be plenty of time to shift direction later, if only she could get the proper coordinates.

For the next six months, Ulsa worked steadily and intently over her navigational equipment and computer readouts, her eyes squinting into the viewscreen in front of her. She muttered to herself and tried all sorts of methods to determine the exact point of space they'd come from. Her main concern was whether the Gale Robel's gyros remained in an accurate positional orientation within their original direction of travel, or if they had been shifted when

the ship was jolted out of sub-binary space into the box. She had no idea of what direction the box was going, or how fast, or even if it had changed direction while en route to wherever it was going. That, after all, was her job and finding their location was what it was all about. Nobody had ever said it would be an easy job, and it wasn't.

Ulsa worked long hours every day, allowing herself only a few short breaks for food and sleep. During a few of these breaks, she often visited Miriam to talk and relax for a while. Over the period of the first two months of their exile here, she noticed that Miriam grew more and more haggard, as had Captain Jun and Sister Sola.

One day, while Ulsa was telling Miriam a funny story about her days at the academy, the elf's face lost all color and she fainted. Ulsa quickly moved her to the ship's sick bay and the medical personnel tried to diagnose the problem. Nothing physical appeared to be wrong, although when Miriam awakened she wasn't coherent and whimpered out in pain. It seemed she and the other two Magums had a blinding pain behind their eyes that was unbearable to the degree of total distraction. Other than that, there were no other symptoms.

The Sisters-Magum had to be sedated. Throughout the entire process of returning the Gale Robel to service, each of the Sisters-Magum was kept under sedation and intravenous feeding. The medical staff could find absolutely nothing physically wrong with any of them. They simply couldn't bear the untraceable pain.

Everybody settled down to repairing and maintaining the Gale Robel until she was fit to move and they determined where to head.

Images of things and shapes both familiar and alien drifted slowly through the sedated vision of Miriam's ethereal consciousness. She sensed, more than saw, rows and rows of luminous dials and gauges with flickering screens placed oddly in their midst. The strangely colored screens displayed abstract patterns and lines within the luminous colors. These seemed somehow larger than life and appeared to be a part of a deeper texture that was mixed with sound, taste, and smell. This was not seen, but felt through her many fingertips. Intrinsically she knew, as if this feeling was real, that this quasi-sense was only one of her many dimensions of senses and perceptions.

A large object moved rhythmically across her lower vision, and she tried, painstakingly, to focus on it. It seemed as if it was a part of some delirious vision mixed with large doses of hallucinogens and hypnotic fixations. What little focus she could achieve, viewed something vaguely resembling a hand with twelve fingers and a thumb, but no fingernails. There were rings on each of the long golden fingers: red, blue, yellow, green, and a variety of other completely alien colors, each, of which, had some important function. The hand appeared to be formed of some translucent golden material that was streaked with indescribably beautiful veins of various colors coursing through the back of its oddly ringed fingers. The golden hand also had very little density.

The limb moved out of focus, replaced by a blurred movement. Miriam's vision then refocused on a lighted hologram-screen-mirror picture that showed the Gale Robel in different degrees of intensity and abstraction. Miriam, who was passive, seemed to be looking both inside the vessel and outside of it at the same time, although she couldn't tell if the screen made it look so strange and abstract, or just her delirious dream.

Suddenly the dark background behind the Gale Robel changed, displaying a diversity of different colored lights, colors that were alien and so odd, that they never existed in the universe Miriam was acquainted with. They were so strange that only intrinsic insight told her that they were colors at all.

The background behind the Gale Robel looked like insane variations of warped stars set in a field of something like a velvety, living blue and green that swayed slowly in some silent galactic wind. Miriam could feel the very galaxy turning around her, ever so slowly.

Over and over these abstract and alien scenes played before Miriam's mind's eye, or was it eyes? At the end of the sequence, she always saw and sensed another unfocused vision, but it never seemed to clear for her.

Miriam lay in the delirious living dream for two years and nine months. Meanwhile, the sisters on board were repairing and testing the ship's main computers. They were also completing the final stages of balancing the sub-binary drives. The entire process of rebuilding the drives had been grueling continuing without interruption as overlapping shifts of engineering technicians carefully honed and built up opposing parts. As the work

progressed, they discovered that due to the growth pattern of the rotary components, more gold would be required to meet the tolerance limits. In all, 475 Cilenic ounces of gold had to be cannibalized from other, less vital components on the vessel, and after discussing it, the chief engineer decided the Weapons Systems Computer and the Laser Rod controls would have to be sacrificed.

The testing and dynamic balancing of the drives' components went surprisingly well, although the engineers intended no real surprises. After all, although they'd all worked overlapping hours in long and never-ending shifts, they never hurried and always checked and rechecked their critical tolerances and workmanship tirelessly. They wanted to be sure everything was correct, for there would be no second chance.

During the initial phases of the sub-binary drive tests, something deep in Miriam's inner mind clicked, and her headache immediately began to recede. For the short time that she remained unconscious, before waking, she focused on the final part of the visions that was plaguing her.

It was indescribable. She was looking at the screen showing the Gale Robel, when she raised her heavy head and saw a dim, hazy reflection. The chamber behind her seemed endless and without boundary, yet she could sense the walls around her on the claustrophobically tiny craft, and they were all wrong. They were placed at angles strangely joined together as to arouse a feeling of a nameless terror in her, and she could see huge, darkened forms moving gracefully through the hazy, almost foggy atmosphere. The ghostly reflection seemed to be her; but not really her.

But even stranger was her face. In the dim reflection, Miriam saw someone - herself - who was incredibly ancient, oddly translucent with many shades of golden skin, or was it scales, covering the calm-looking countenance. Yet, she was radiantly and vibrantly beautiful in an abstract way, one of the most perfect specimens of her race, with eyes so deep that Miriam sank into them even through the hazy reflection.

Miriam's eyes snapped open. The medical technician monitoring her had noticed a change in her vital signs. Something subtle, yet noticeable, so the technician withdrew all sedation in order to make tests. She was surprised to see Miriam react so quickly.

Her head was still woozy, for the sedative took a half hour to wear off. Her headache, which she remembered fainting from and sometimes dimly awakening with, was gone, and the edges of her mind felt only the vestiges of pain as they curled away, then drifted into oblivion.

"How long have I been out?" Miriam asked with apprehension. She was shocked to learn that it had been two years and nine months since she'd first fainted. She tried to raise her head, to look around, and couldn't. The effort made her very tired.

She tried again, and painfully turned her head so the other litters in the room came into view. Sola lay on one of them and Yanna on the other. Both were still unconscious and looked wasted.

As soon as Miriam had been tested and told the technician of her diminished pain, the medic checked vital signs of the other Sisters-Magum and noted their signs had also changed subtly. Then she took them both off sedation, and within a short time they awoke.

Yanna was furious when she learned just how long she'd been out of commission, but couldn't do anything about it, since she was too weak from being bedridden. They had spent the two years and nine months in ten percent gravity, and received daily therapeutic massages by the med-techs to maintain their muscle tone, so their bodies hadn't deteriorated.

For the next three weeks, Miriam, Yanna, and Sola built themselves up. They were still weak at the end of the short period, but Yanna insisted on returning to the bridge. She wanted to know exactly what happened while she was unconscious.

During their three-week recovery period, the three discussed their odd dream realities, finding that each had experienced roughly the same visions and sensations. They also noted that each had awakened with a loud, clear click in their subconscious mind. This click seemed to have coincided with the first testing of the sub-binary drives.

Finally the day came when Yanna took over the bridge again. Walking slowly down the corridors of her ship, she looked around fondly before entering onto the bridge. The sisters working there busily turned to see her come in, and Commander Marisa Korris, her second-in-command, relinquished the command chair to her with a broad smile. "She's all yours again Captain, welcome back."

Yanna winked at her and saluted. "I'm glad to be back in one piece Marisa. I thank you very much." Then, exhausted by her weakened condition, she sat down in her command chair. Everyone on the bridge smiled; it felt good to have their old captain back again.

After a few minutes of registering her status in the ship's log, Yanna swiveled her chair around to face Commander Rubenel's station. The plump woman waved to her when she had entered, before returning to her labors. Yanna watched as Ulsa muttered to herself and worked.

"Well, Commander Rubenel, how are we set on coordinates?" she asked.

During the two and three quarter years the crew spent putting the Gale Robel back together, Ulsa had relentlessly tested every means possible to locate the exact direction from which they had come. She spent hours every day poring over her computer, muttering discussions with her-self and answering them; she was a trilateral personality, and in her case, each of her three personalities liked to discuss everything with each other. Hence, she talked to herself a lot.

Ulsa finally settled on a faint white star which lay just 32 thousandths of a degree off dead center of the cross-section hairs on the mechanical gyroscope's aft range orientation optical alignment telescope. Nothing in the fields around it had any sense of familiarity, but this one minute pinprick of light, which was indeed a star, could, after Ulsa took account for the direction of its primary velocity affecting its course shift, be Vesam 8624A. This was the brightest star in the neighborhood of Tristan III. Nothing else in this neighborhood registered. This was partly because of extreme distance and partly because of its direction of rotation within the galaxy.

Now Ulsa sat at her computer, looking at the results of one of her many tests. She shook her head in dismay. She couldn't be sure the coordinates were right. She wasn't sure whether the Gale Robel was actually in temporal space or in the ethereal sub-binary. If the ship was still in temporal space, it would have to be in a galaxy other than their own, for there were far too many star-fields around her. This suggested they were in another galaxy looking out and, hopefully, back into their own; hence the starfields of two galaxies between the ship and the slightly familiar star.

However, Ulsa was inclined to accept the Gale Robel was somehow in the sub-binary. No ship had ever stopped in the sub-binary before, but during sub-level travel all stars appeared to be warped. Perhaps if a ship was not in motion in the sub-binary, the starfields would look the same as in temporal space. Ulsa didn't know.

The stars somehow felt as though they were in a distinctly nonsequential arrangement. As Ulsa looked out at them, she saw myriads of colors indicating various stages of development and evolution. In fact, what convinced her that the Gale Robel stood in the sub-binary was the sheer number of stars visible and the odd variety of their spectral shifts which didn't appear to have any rhyme or reason. Thus, she felt, they must be in the nonsequential sub-binary plane, seeing star patterns of past, present, and far-off future all at once.

Ulsa sighed. It would be fascinating to study all these stars and see how they behaved in this nonsequential climate. Unfortunately, her attempts to find the Gale Robel's original position consumed all of her time, and she couldn't satisfy her curiosity and interest.

She sat back, reflecting on the beauty of the universe. If only the primitives could comprehend how really complex and grand the Eternal's creation really is, they might throw away their egocentric idols and really learn to appreciate the Creator.

With this short lapse for thought, Ulsa looked again at her intricate calculations, intending to retest them again and again until the ship was forced to leave from lack of supplies. For the thousandth time, she concluded the Gale Robel had traveled exactly two hours, three minutes, and 26 seconds, Standard Galactic Common, and should have traveled some 0.76 light years on the Argonel Scale. Her nearest calculations were based on the apparent distance to the familiar star, Vesam 8624A. They showed the Gale Robel's box had traveled approximately 152.36 light years on the Argonel Scale, suggesting a ratio of light speed in the sub-binary to be 800,000 to one.

Ulsa sighed again. It was completely unbelievable. But, that was what she had concluded, and it could be way off since the measurement of the distance to the star wasn't based on triangulation, but on its spectral shift and light intensity alone. Then, of course, the star might not be the one she hoped it was.

What if they had traveled all that distance? Perhaps after the Gale Robel's repairs, if they got back, the Nashramh sisters could make a study of the phenomenon and come up with a new sub-binary drive. Perhaps they would travel back at the same speed as normal, and therefore, take 14 days to reach familiar space. What scared her, was that the faintness of the star might indicate that all of her observations were incorrect and that the distance might be geometrically greater. In that case the entire ship's complement would be dead, since there was only food and supplies left for two months at the most. But at least they might get back, and the sisterhood would pick them up, dead or alive, just as long as they were not lost out in the middle of nowhere.

Ulsa reported her figures to the captain, then, went back to work. Yanna looked at her for a moment, and said, "ah, well, I understand none of your complex calculations Ulsa, but you have the only educated guess in town. So we'll make our heading for the star system Vesam 8624A as soon as the sub-binary drives have been fully tested and approved."

Yanna had to wait for another five weeks for the drives to be tested completely. Inwardly she chafed at the bit, although she knew the crew was in total command of the situation and working as fast as was safely possible. Her main concern was the Gale Robel's low supplies, and if things weren't in working order soon, there would be no one around to turn the ship back.

The crew knew that supplies were getting low, so each sister had cut her own rations, long before, to meet the pressing situation. Even Ulsa cut down, although Miriam was surprised to learn that the heavy woman really ate very little in the first place. Her obesity was just a characteristic of her race, and was mostly a spongy muscle tissue with a protective cover of fat.

During the next five weeks, the Sisters-Magum worked together on reviewing each part of the ship's repairs until they all agreed to their acceptance. Yanna ruled on this, not as an abdication of her own responsibility as commanding officer, but as a safety measure. She still had no idea what happened to her or the other Magums, and although she was feeling normal, she was taking no chances and wanted the help of the two most experienced officers on the ship. Miriam, Sola, and Sister Commander Marisa Korris reviewed each and every item and voted on its acceptance.

One thing particularly bothered the three Sisters-Magum, they couldn't contact Council Central at all. All three tried, and despite the distance, which according to Ulsa wasn't that great, couldn't make a connection.

After most of the final testing and fine-tuning procedures were completed, Yanna called a conference of the entire ship's complement, along with the three passengers. After presenting the facts as she understood them, she decided to make their heading to Vesam 8624A at 16:00 hours that day; the crew agreed unanimously, and after the conference the Gale Robel was brought around so she faced the star. The vessel revolved around her sets of gyros, which included the sub-binary and Able-Rexol Units. Finally the vessel was set and aligned with the tiny pinprick of light.

No one on the Gale Robel really expected to make it back to familiar space alive, since shipboard supplies were critically low. They were more concerned with having the vessel headed in the right direction, and remaining with her even while dead so they could be rescued by their sisterhood in the future.

At 14:00 hours, the entire ship's complement stopped everything they were doing to reflect upon their strange trek through the paths of temporal reality and on the gifts of compassionate reason given to them by their Eternal Creator. As Miriam stood thinking about this and looking back on her fondest memories, she looked around at the quiet faces of her sisters all facing the beautiful starfields visible on the ship's screens. Each person had worked hard for the chance to go home, and she hoped they could all make it.

Yanna led the prayer of eternal commitment over the vessel's audio-link.

"Hear, O'Daughters of Compassionate Justice, the Eternal our Creator, the Eternal is one."

Then she offered her own words of thanks for the privilege given her to have been an active part of creation, for all of the wonders and living souls she had experienced, and for her ability to share this time with all her sisters aboard the Gale Robel.

The seconds ticked down in preparation for the sub-binary jump, and each sister prepared herself for the inevitable.

Yanna's voice burst through the audio-link, "Four, three, two, one . . . Activate!". The sub-binary drives purred into full volume,

and the jeweled starfields changed from pin-points of brilliant light to a plasma-like flow around the Gale Robel. As the vessel began to move, each of the Sisters-Magum felt a distinct click in her subconscious mind. Then everything was back to normal.

Exactly two hours, three minutes, and 26 seconds later, the Gale Robel broke into temporal space. Eagerly Yanna and Ulsa looked at the navigational viewscreen, searching for any familiar constellations. If nothing had changed, they would start the sub-binary drives again and begin the long trip home. Everybody hoped, however, that whatever made their box travel so fast had somehow affected them, and that by some miracle, they would end up in familiar territory. Otherwise there were only provisions enough to last four days, and that was it.

Ulsa immediately scanned the surrounding starfields with her computer scan. Everyone held their breath as the seconds ticked off, and let it out when she finally looked up.

Ulsa knew exactly where they were. She didn't know how the sub-binary drives had gotten them here, but they were in familiar space. "We are 12 light years from XB0313U, and only 14 light years from Tristan III!" she exclaimed, smiling happily.

Yanna threw back her head and laughed, "Yeah! Now we can get down to serious business, like going home."

The complement of the vessel's crew, having heard this over the shipboard audio-link, broke into a ragged cheer. It was a wonder they had returned in one piece.

Yanna immediately ordered all drives and unnecessary systems be shut down. She wanted to take no chances of causing anything strange to happen. She also wanted everything to be left alone so that Nashramh intelligence and scientific personnel could analyze it. Something new and revolutionary had happened, and nobody knew just what it was, except that on their own they had traveled 152 light years in a little over two hours.

Yanna also ordered the secret Nashramh distress signal to be transmitted. Afterwards, the Sisters-Magum went to their quarters to try to contact Council Central and report their status.

Miriam sat in the middle of her bed, confused. Nothing happened when she tried to contact Ruby. She couldn't even reach her first level of meditation.

For the first time since leaving Borgdragon Estate, she felt utter and complete panic welling up inside her, and a feeling of despair.

She couldn't contact Council Central from the sub-binary 152 light years away, and hoped that this was a freak accident caused by their odd ordeal. But now that they were in temporal space, nothing changed and she still couldn't make contact.

Miriam didn't know whether to put her fist through the bulkhead or to cry, and she felt empty and alone. It took all of her self-discipline to remain calm.

In the meantime, the Gale Robel's communication section was broadcasting the S.O.S. on an top-secret wave-length and in a special code. The crew settled down to wait.

After six days, the Nashramh scout freighter 'SD Half Mate' broke into the temporal zone and came alongside the Gale Robel. Grappling gear connected between the two stationary vessels, pulling the scout destroyer into the cargo bay of the eight by three kilometer freighter. The fit was tight, but the operation went off smoothly.

After the cargo bay was pressurized, a business-like voice instructed the crew of the Gale Robel to shut down all systems and immediately leave the ship. It would be placed in quarantine per special action provision QT7644D of the Nashramh Emergency Procedures Manual. Miriam wasn't acquainted with the procedure, but both Yanna and Sola assured her that it was the standard procedure for this type of operation. Before she could ask for more details, the crew began filing out of the vessel, chatting happily.

Miriam was one of the last to exit the Gale Robel, and as she approached the crew members on the loading dock, she noticed that they all stood in a close group. Not only that, but they were also surrounded by spacesuited guards with weapons trained on them. On all of them!

Miriam stopped dead in her tracks, her mind whirling in wild confusion. She gasped out in surprise, "what in Sargon's hell!" turning to one of the spacesuited guards. Fighting a compulsion to scream, she continued. "What do you think you are doing?"

Miriam felt the impact, but nothing more as she pitched forward onto the loading dock.

Her limp body was removed to the freighter's security section, identified against a special file, and her dark blue tattoo duly noted. Her clothing was stripped off and placed in a special container, and she was placed, still unconscious, into a cryo-freezer for immediate shipment.

Chapter 21

Library

Divorced from her Magum complex, Miriam remained an anomaly because she was still a multiple personality . . . the sleeping Miriam, Raphael, and the controlling elf-child from Samael-Borgdragon's playground. Now she was to experience a form of exile wherein her physical emotions played a dominant role . . . and herein her assignment to a mundane job in our central library was a gift she slowly learned to appreciate.

11:10-21 MAREN 6903-6N5

"Herein we have a familiar morsel," hissed the lipless mouth lined with rows of razor sharp, jagged teeth. Miriam came to slowly, realizing almost immediately she was back at Three-Stones Academy. The two reptilian Sisters of the Gate were thawing her out from cryo-freeze.

She remained silent throughout the entire procedure, and felt comfortable only after she received the revitalizing broth. All the while, the two sisters hissed to each other with an air of business as usual.

Once they removed her body from the recovery tube, they bathed then dressed her in a soft white robe, much like the one from over a century earlier. This time they provided her with her false legs.

They processed her differently this time, however. One of the sisters ushered her into a room, some four meters down a long hall. When she entered, she encountered another attendant, a

woman with a thick-torso, massive arms and legs. The attendant asked her to lie down on the bed, the only furniture in the room.

Within seconds of lying down, Miriam drifted into unconsciousness, although she didn't realize it. All at once she felt a strong compulsion to go through a long, white tunnel, and into a brilliantly lit room. Once she was inside the new room, the color deepened into a ruby-red laced with sapphire blue and a pearly white, culminating in a soft merging of the three. Miriam stood silently at attention, waiting.

After a few seconds, one of the walls shimmered, and Ruby appeared as Miriam remembered her, sitting behind her desk on a comfortable leather chair.

"Well, Miriam, I thought we'd lost you, since I couldn't make contact with you. But now you've returned, and I'm happy to see you."

Ruby spoke softly, and smiled at last, but Miriam didn't notice that she seemed a little subdued and wary.

"I am glad to be back," she answered, feeling ill at ease.

"Is something troubling you, Miriam?"

"Yes. When we returned to our normal grid-quadrant and were picked up by our Nashramh freighter, those bitches aimed laser rifles at us as if we were the enemy. How, in the sisterhood's name, could they treat us like that after all we had been through and done?"

"Weren't you informed about the quarantine regulations?"

"With concern to placing the Gale Robel in quarantine, yes, but I learned nothing about being treated like Samael-spawn."

"I can see there is a great deal you don't know," murmured Ruby in even tones. "The reason the Gale Robel was put in emergency quarantine was twofold. First, as I have already mentioned, I couldn't make contact with you or the other Sisters-Magum, a phenomenon which has never occurred before. Second, when the freighter picked up your ship, the Gale Robel was registering all of the wrong physical details. Even the Nashramh emergency S.O.S. was a little off, although it was definitely our secret signal. We had to verify just who and what you were," she finished firmly. "Everyone on that vessel has been altered in some way, especially you three Magums. We didn't know the facts then."

"What facts?" Miriam blurted out without thinking.

"First, you were all subjected to an intense force that altered your biological organisms by some unknown means. Second, you are no longer a Magum. This is the reason why. . . ."

"Not a Magum!" Miriam nearly shrieked.

"For reasons that are as yet unknown to us," Ruby continued patiently, feeling pity for what the child must be experiencing, "your singular personality has been shattered and in your case, eight of your sister parts were separated into individual personalities. . . ."

Miriam's mind reeled with the impact of Ruby's statement. Not a Magum?

Suddenly, voices and emotions crowded into her mind and she exploded. "What are you trying to say? That you are not God? You certainly try to act like God and now what are you. . . ."

Miriam awoke with a start on the bed. The massive attendant stood beside her, waiting. "It's time for you to go now, Miriam," she said soothingly as she lifted her to her feet.

Miriam was still stunned by her outburst at Ruby, and she immediately felt ashamed. She became steadily depressed as the two left the room and walked to the end of the hallway they had arrived by. It took all of Miriam's self-discipline to keep from breaking out in tears or slamming her fist against the wall, and she was confused. She had never felt so alone and emotional before.

Beyond the door, Miriam found a ground car waiting for her, and the attendant, who never identified herself, drove Miriam to a campus off the main academy, telling her that her new assignment would be here. After less than half an hour, during which Miriam remained silent, she stepped out of the vehicle in front of an apartment door. The attendant gave her the key, bid her farewell, and drove away.

Miriam was completely depressed when she entered her new apartment. She felt she had completely botched it with Ruby, and felt a mixture of utter hopelessness and panic in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't even interested in the menial assignment she would probably be given, whatever it was, for all she could think about was that she would be punished for her outburst to Ruby and never forgiven.

Miriam entered her new apartment and began exploring it almost mechanically, just to do something and keep from crying.

She entered into a living room, which held a large, overstuffed couch, chairs, and several tables, as well as some entertainment equipment. The room overlooked a lush garden.

After fingering a few of the statuettes, Miriam passed into the kitchen, which held all the usual cooking accessories. She then returned to the living room again. A door next to the kitchen led into a comfortable bedroom, which had an adjoining bathroom and another closed door. All of the rooms were set in the standard style, although they were beautifully decorated with an alien, but exquisite taste which Miriam found to be both exciting and satisfying.

The second door in the bedroom led into a library, which pleased Miriam. One wall was a clear window overlooking the garden, while another was half-filled with a mirror screen. The library's design was purely scholastic, and contained a desk equipped with a complex of special recorders, small screens, and three keyboards, one of which was tied into the academy's main library banks.

Miriam reentered the living room, before passing into the garden. Actually, the living room seemed to be an indoor extension of the garden, for the couch and other furnishings blended in so well, giving the sensation of a furnished primeval forest that bordered on being a floral oasis. Many varieties of leafy plants were scattered around the room, and the garden was filled with tropical flora in an array of colors dominated by a shallow freeform swimming pool that added a lovely shimmering effect to the entire area. A small waterfall fountain chattered and tinkled softly at one corner of the pool, while soft misty light shone through an opaque grilled ceiling that was designed to maintain a constant temperature throughout the different seasons.

As she began to discover the wonders of her newly assigned home, Miriam's spirits lifted a little. Apparently her emotional outburst to Ruby was not being met by punishment after all, but with what obviously was a period of retreat.

Miriam felt a little better, though now fatigued. She went back into her living room and settled herself on the fluffy couch facing the garden. Within minutes, she was fast asleep.

Sister Rinim Poodor pressed a green button near the entrance door, activating an ornate chime within. Miriam started from a troubled sleep, wondering what the noise was, then, sat up on the

couch rubbing her eyes. She got up to answer the front door, and upon opening it was surprised to see her old friend there.

Rinim bowed slightly, then, grabbed Miriam in a warm bear hug that expressed both happiness and relief.

"My lovely child," she gurgled, "I'm so relieved you made it back. I have so much to tell you."

Miriam broke down and began to sob tearlessly, more from relief than from her intense frustration. Rinim hugged her again, and together they stepped inside, closing the door behind them. The two looked around the cozy apartment, making light conversation, then went into the library and sat down.

Rinim got to the point immediately, for this was a matter of concern for her and she wanted Miriam to know all the real facts as soon as possible.

"Miriam, my dear friend and eternal sister, I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say, because it is vital to both you and I that these words are spoken."

"Is it about my childish outburst at Ruby?" asked Miriam, trying to hold back her choked tone.

"Yes, yes but more. First of all, you didn't burn any bridges with Ruby. She cut you off because she won't argue with anyone, for nobody ever listens in an argument."

"I know, I know."

"I'm here speaking for both Ruby and myself and in this case there is truly no difference, for we truly love you and will not abandon you. Nor will we let you abandon us, especially for something that is no fault of yours. Now! Hear me well. As soon as we find out exactly what happened to you, Sola and Yanna, we'll put your Magum personalities back together again. What has happened to you also happened to them. At this time all three of you have been assigned to restful, non-stressful duties until such time as we know what happened to you. This is no way a punishment, but an absolute necessity. We could, if necessary, put you back together today, but we don't know what took you apart or if you could stay together. We don't want to lose you again, ever. That's what I came here to say, and I'll repeat it over and over again a thousand times if need be until you thoroughly understand."

"What I do not understand, Rinim, is why I feel so hopeless. Why I snapped at Ruby, and cannot control myself."

"Ah. You, my dear, can't help that your emotions are so strong, for they have been suppressed and controlled throughout your entire life, since entering Borgdragon. In fact, you're having even more difficulty than either Sola or Yanna, since they both had several millennia to become used to each part of themselves, and can more easily handle being a single person than you. You have, in fact, just discovered you have strong emotions now that your Magum personality has come apart. When you were together, each personality drew on his or her experience in each situation you faced so you never had to resort to the use of emotions. And that was thrust upon you from the very first. You're actually doing much better than we hoped, which shows your self-discipline and strength."

With this, Rinim sat back. "My dear, after that much uninterrupted speech, I need a drink of something refreshing. Since you just moved in, I brought my own."

Then, reaching into her black purse, she extracted a flat, liter-sized bottle. This took up much of the purse.

"This is called 'Jenny's-Treat', and it isn't intoxicating. However, it will give your taste buds a jolt that will gladden any day."

Miriam gave Rinim a tired smile, then stood up and walked slowly to her kitchen, returning with two stemmed glasses. Rinim filled both, and they sipped the light brown fluid while the fountain outside in the garden chattered away, reminding them of happier times. Miriam found that Jenny's Treat had an odd, pleasing tang to it, though she couldn't put her finger on the exact reaction it gave her taste buds. She now understood just why Jenny's-Treat gladdened any day.

They continued their discussion for several hours, during which Miriam told Rinim about her strange ordeal and all she could remember of the alien visions. According to Rinim, both Sola and Yanna reported similar visions but theirs showed subtle differences, probably due to the time sequences in which they came into contact with whatever it was they saw.

One more problem was discovered about the crew of the Gale Robel; all were subject to an accelerated aging process. No one knew why. Of course the answers would come, but when, nobody knew. However, this rapid process of aging was another reason why everyone had been placed on light duty.

Miriam and Rinim shared a delicious dinner from the kitchen stock, resuming their conversation over their meal. By the time they finished, it was well past evening, and Rinim made preparations to leave. On her way to the door she paused.

"I want for you to understand this, Miriam. Although you are presently damaged in such a manner that makes you technically no longer a Magum, you're still in fact a Sister-Magum by title and rank, as are Sola and Yanna. You are considered by us and by Ruby to be walking wounded who must, because of your wounds, convalesce until properly healed. Therefore, you must understand your relationship with me and the other Sisters-Magum is still that of an equal. We expect you to share your life with us as we do with you. If you become emotional and want to fight, we will trounce you just as we would each other without pulling our punches. We're all a part of the same stone, like it or not."

With this, Rinim quickly kissed Miriam and punched her on the shoulder. Then she turned and left. "See you later, Shorty."

Miriam smiled to herself. After she saw Rinim off she went for a swim and then to bed, feeling much better and prepared for the future. Now she realized she would never be forsaken by those whom she loved so dearly.

The next morning she rose early, went for another swim, and ate a light breakfast. Afterwards, she went to her library, and was reading a book of Chasmalim literature when she received a call on her desk comm-unit. The friendly voice instructed her to report to the Chief Librarian's office at 08:00 hours for her new job assignment. It was already 7:30, so she checked over her uniform and called a transport to take her there.

Miriam gasped in awe when she entered the library. The grand building itself, built of stone, looked huge from the outside, but she was completely unprepared for the volume of books it held. Wall and floor shelves on each of 50 floors held billions of books and information discs, and there were many out of the way sections with small desks containing a standard screen and keyboard equipment for visiting scholars.

Miriam had a little trouble finding the Chief Librarian's office. The woman holding this awesome responsibility was Sister Nuber Violen, a tall, bony woman with wrinkled chartreuse skin and long grey hair pulled into a tight knot. Her features were long and severe, with a wide, thin-lipped mouth and narrow, slightly

upturned eyes. She spoke softly, carefully articulating each word as if she was speaking to a newborn novice, then waited patiently for the proper response. With the precision of an old maid schoolteacher, she outlined Miriam's new duties, which were simple and mildly interesting. Then she proceeded to show Miriam every nook and cranny of her new duty station.

The area where Miriam would spend her tour of duty was dedicated to a narrow section on Chajothim political and economic history, covering the period of expansion from the 22nd incorporated cluster to the 26th. The sheer volume of this section of their history would take hundreds of lifetimes to really read and digest. Upon looking at the material, Miriam sighed to herself.

Nuber assigned her the arduous task of identifying the key market factors for each of the 62,000 building block treaties, before listing them in the library's central register. This task was of a subjective nature, since each factor was tied to political trends founded upon human emotional pressures and other subjective considerations. The task couldn't be done by computer.

Miriam felt completely overwhelmed by the huge task, but as she dove into it, she found it was indeed interesting, for she had to learn many other aspects of Chajothim history and cultural determinants to do her work accurately. She also found Sister Nuber to be a source of deep insights into the values of human emotions and in the structure of temporal occurrences. This helped Miriam not only in her research, but also in understanding herself.

One day Miriam told Nuber about herself and her confusion about suddenly not being a Magum. She had to deal with emotions she had never felt strongly before, which frightened her.

Sister Nuber never let Miriam forget that emotions are deep-rooted in this very basic stage of psychic development, possessed by all human souls in temporal exile. "This," she pointed out, "is a curse as well as a blessing. Once the soul divests herself of her used and dead body, she will upon rebirth into a new one forget, at least consciously, most of her past experiences. Especially those which tend to load her down with guilt. Conversely, one can't consciously remember lessons learned in previous temporal lives either. In essence, each new body constitutes a fresh start for us, but also makes us a prisoner of surrounding events."

"I think I understand," Miriam murmured.

"This is," Nuber continued, "reversed in older sisters. That is, those with binary souls, and a very few exceptions without binaries. They are cursed with memory when born into the bodies of infants, for their youth, then, was only physical."

Miriam shrugged, never having experienced that.

Rinim and the other sisters visited regularly for social discussions and such, each insisting that Miriam attend all of their many social functions and informal get-togethers. When she arrived at the first of them, she felt out of place, but in minutes she realized she was still really one of them. She came to openly enjoy attending the functions and being with her friends. Between her routine of library research, enjoying her personal library and garden, and attending the many lively social events, Miriam began the slow process of learning to deal with her new-found emotions. Remembering her short time with Ben gave her strength and comfort when she felt especially lonely.

She learned from self-analysis that her overt aggressive compulsions to smash her fist through walls was an expression of her male Tachalet personality bound in a female body and subject to female chemistry. She also learned that her compulsion to cry was a combination of the old Miriam coupled with herself, the traumatized elf child. She came to understand she was truly the original elf intellect with whom Raphael the Tachalet and Miriam of the Shadi Betulah had united. Somehow, they'd held together even in the face of the unknown thing separating her from her other eight personalities. Rinim told her this, indicating that Miriam was the only one of the three Magums to retain a binary personality. The other two were reduced to a single personality, while their other parts, as well as Miriam's other eight parts, were with Ruby awaiting the time when they could be reunited with their soul mates.

Fifty-four peaceful years passed as Miriam became well-versed in the rudiments of Chajothim history and culture, both of which were shared by two of her separated personalities. Olimine and Salphine. However, the days began to drag, and Miriam, who had aged rapidly, was becoming grey and was forming wrinkles and sags in her once lovely skin. Even though she performed her full regimen of exercises daily, she still felt her body becoming dull and tired. She also cherished fond memories of Ben and their time together on the Freeworld and their short trip to Phodden Morg.

Finally she came to a decision. She wanted to take a real part in the sisterhood activities and not waste away as a librarian. Having made the decision, she went to Sister Rinim's apartment to talk to her about it.

The two sat down over a glass of liqueur, and Miriam told Rinim of her decision, concluding, "I just want to feel as though I have done something necessary before I die, and not just be an aging librarian."

Rinim nodded in agreement. "You know that wherever we send you will be necessary, even if it seems unimportant."

"I know that. I am willing to do anything I can to be an active part of our sisterhood."

"Then, my dear Miriam, I'll see Ruby and get you a new assignment. We're terribly shorthanded with trained operatives on the outer rim, since the black ones have become bolder and are infiltrating corrupters onto the outer rim-worlds. They are preparing the way for their conquest of these worlds and for their eventual major incursion into our Starset Galaxy."

The assignment was six weeks in coming, but it came nevertheless. Miriam would enter cryo-freeze, be shipped to system DMA4958C, and be stationed on a small industrialized world called Lublinog. The Nashramh didn't have an embassy there, but had two sisters operating out of a Palean trading warehouse where they worked as import checkers. Miriam would report to Sisters Pivar Ak and Liden Aden, and act as a liaison between them and a new ally within the Lublinog trade government, named Uy Agi. Miriam thought of them as the three Akdg's because of the first two letters of their last names. She would receive no further instructions until she reached the assigned world in 15 years, since the situation was always in a state of flux in that sector of the rim and no Magums were there to speed up communications. Hence, all data and reports were at least a month old before the nearest Magum received it.

The next morning, without proper time for good-byes to her friends and library associates, Miriam reported to the cryo-freeze facility as ordered. Whatever was happening, the Nashramh was wasting no time.

The procedure was a complex one, although Miriam was not directly involved with it. She drank the fluids given her, showered,

and received a special inoculation. Her artificial legs also had to be prepared, since the plant pad would have to be rejuvenated when she was.

A few moments before she entered the final stages of the cryo-freeze process, Miriam was allowed to contact Rinim. They exchanged farewells and Miriam asked Rinim to speak to her other friends for her. Rinim was happy to do so, and before hanging up, wished Miriam, "good hunting."

Miriam was then placed in a cryo-freeze container labeled: "Palean Account #0061ANO1165, in care of Mr. Ogleed Zorbik, Lublinog DMA498BC." She was frozen in the container and would be thawed out in it. This was a dangerous system for thawing and rejuvenating since, although it was fully automatic, it could be activated by anyone anywhere. However, in this case, the type of container was absolutely necessary because of the primitive location she was being sent to and the secrecy surrounding her arrival. The container would be shipped on the next available craft, which was leaving Three-Stones Academy in less than an hour.

Chapter 22

Lublinog

Our decision to send Miriam to Lublinog wasn't a wise one, and everyone paid a heavy price for it. But, in the scheme of things, maybe it was for the best. . . .

10:00-25 SHIKIM 6992-6N5

The dusty cryo-freeze box remained in storage in warehouse U505 for 19 years, unclaimed by Mr. Ogleed Zorbik. His name was listed in the company's customer register, nor could it be found in the large Federated World Directory or Bullion's Catalogue of Citizens and Off-World Transients.

Yut Ryu, a red-skinned Palean Trelic breed warehouse records specialist, was one of the few hundred company citizens left on Lublinog. Many had transferred out when the street-arrests and murders of off-worlders began many years ago. The local citizens were an ugly bunch under the best of conditions, but with another resurgence of Centralistic Sargonism, they'd become a brutal mob of religious fanatics bent on destroying all unbelievers and off-breeds. These loving faithful of Sweet Sargon beat their women to death for not bearing sons for their Lord Sweet Sargon, and only tolerated one female child to live for every two surviving male children born. Women were used mercilessly by their fathers, uncles, and even brothers, yet were butchered if they were not chaste when sold as a wife to another man.

In the past 30 years, the natives became intolerant of off-world tradesmen. They'd begun a concerted move to banish all foreigners from the planet since they considered them as subhuman. There

were daily murders, street arrests, and beatings of the alien residents the population had welcomed two centuries earlier. These off-world guests had worked to raise the standard of living of the natives, who now vandalized the off-worlders' personal and company properties. These properties, the angry mobs believed, belonged to Sweet Sargon, who would one day come and claim the men who were worthy of his regard and who loved him without hesitation. To those few who didn't believe in Sargonism, however, it was getting out of hand.

Yut located the derelict shipping box and studied its dusty controls. They were simple enough if one knew how to read them. He broke the control seal and punched out the six-number code on the keyboard under the seal cover. It would take ten hours to thaw out the occupant, so he set his wrist alarm to remind him to return. Then he went on with his work schedule.

Miriam lay quietly inside the shipping container, listening to the purr of the recovery system's complex bio-activator units. Various light frequencies slowly thawed her flesh and internal organs, while a synthetic adrenalin compound accelerated her heart rate to normal. An enclosed bio-organic fluid computer carefully monitored each of Miriam's recovery functions for proper biological responses. This computer scheduled each phase of her waking process to prevent difficulties.

She now breathed regularly, while a soft voice spoke from a speaker beside her head. The soothing voice instructed her on how to begin her preliminary recovery exercises.

Miriam worked on these exercises, using in place dynamic rhythms, for two hours. Then the cryo-system's automatic equipment came to a full stop and the container's seal released, opening the spring-loaded lid.

During this time, Miriam considered her new tour of duty. Ruby had briefed her that this, Lublinog, was being systematically taken over by the black ones. Her own arrival would be kept secret. The natives of the planet were apparently primitives, who couldn't control the religious fervor of Sargonism which promised anything to fanatical believers.

Miriam wondered if everything had gone according to plan. She had no way of knowing until the lid opened, so she exercised and hoped the black ones weren't the individuals who'd activated the box's controls.

When the lid finally opened, Miriam breathed in the stale, dusty air of the warehouse. Above her, a brownish-red face with tired-looking watery blue eyes looked down at her. As her eyes focused, she saw a red hand reaching down to help her out. It belonged to a man.

"I'm sorry if I have awakened you at the wrong time," Yut drawled in his slow way, his voice coarse and raspy. "But Mister Ogleed Zorbik hasn't claimed you in the 19 years you've been here. Terrible things are happening that have persuaded me, in your best interests, to awaken you."

Miriam was shocked. Nineteen years?

Yut helped the naked old woman out of the container, noting her missing legs.

"My legs are in the cryo-container, in the lower level," Miriam said. "Thank you for helping me." She knew something had gone terribly wrong, and that this man meant no harm to her.

Yut set her on a large carton before returning to the container to find her legs. "Here you are, my lady, I've also unpacked your clothes from the side compartment." With this, he handed her the legs and clothing, which was Lublinogian in design.

After her legs were in place, Miriam dressed quickly while Yut quietly informed her of current events. When he finished speaking, Miriam asked, "Do two import checkers by the names of Pivar Ak and Liden Aden work in this warehouse?"

Yut scratched his head and thought for a long moment. He had a keen warehouseman's memory, but had to shake his head. "There were two women by those names who worked here, but they were murdered . . . ah, about 23, uh, no . . . 22 years ago by Lublinogian religious fanatics. I remember only because their dead bodies, which apparently offended the Sargonians, were impaled on the iron fence outside our manager's office."

He paused, then continued. "We weren't allowed to take them down for more than a week. By then the carrion birds had pretty well reduced them. We cremated what was left in our incinerator." He paused again, frowning. "A lot of our other citizens weren't so lucky. Some were skinned alive while others were cooked alive; all in the name of their 'Sweet Sargon'." He scowled. "These have been terrible times and they're getting worse. All off-worlders have been given one week to clear off or be exterminated as vermin. That's why I awakened you. You, too, may escape, for if you were found

here in this container, who knows what hideous things they would do to you."

Miriam felt inside the inner pocket of her coat. "Thank you, my friend. I have a good idea of what they would do, but fortunately I still have my passport and my open trade line tickets." She stopped a moment. I am sorry, but we have not been introduced. My name is Miriam. What is yours?"

He smiled. "I'm Yut Ryu, one of the few Paleans left in the company's warehouses. I'm to leave tomorrow for a company freighter that is already overloaded. Only company personnel with absolute proof of citizenship are being accepted aboard. But, I have a ticket for another company freighter leaving on the final day of the ultimatum. Your tickets will be of no use, so I hope this one will help you."

He thrust it into her hand. "Don't let anyone know you have this, or they may kill you to get it. There are too few ships in the neighborhood to accommodate all of the off-world citizens so there is panic everywhere. You may stay here if you wish, but I'm afraid we have no weapons with which to protect ourselves."

Miriam thanked him again, and left him to his work, which he insisted on doing despite the terrible conditions because, 'it was his job'.

She walked around the large warehouse and found the now empty employee's canteen. She located some fresh water, dried fruit, and bread to satisfy her gnawing hunger. Miriam then left the warehouse, which was entirely empty of people, and walked into the foreign trade area. There were visible signs of fear everywhere, so she took on an appearance of extreme tension to blend in with the crowd. A notice nailed to the customs building announced that the trade area and warehouse compound were exempt from retribution until midnight of Lovemonth's first day of Sargon's year 8,914,114. This was just six days away. Afterwards, all property would belong to Sargon's loving faithful and all off-world vermin would be exterminated.

That evening, she returned to the warehouse and ate supper with Yut. He was in charge of the gigantic warehouse, working alone. They talked into the night, since Yut was starved for human company and fearful for the future. He told Miriam of the major turn of events during the past hundred years which led to the present conditions and Miriam thought back to all of the histories

of Gensargon's conquests she'd seen back at Borgdragon. Now she was living it.

Yut felt guilty about leaving when there were so many others who could not. However his company ticket had his eye retina imprinted on it and was absolutely nontransferable. This special precaution was taken to protect company personnel from being murdered for their tickets, and this fact had been broadcast many times throughout the foreign trade area.

The ticket he gave to Miriam, however, belonged to a man murdered by Sargon's faithful, who were not interested in such matters. The murdered man's body was thrown through the warehouse door two weeks ago as a warning to get out, and Yut had cremated the mutilated corpse. The unmarked grey ticket was sticking out of the dead man's pocket.

They talked on through the night about the faithful fanatics of Sargon's sweet love, who'd been growing in their religious fervor for the past 50 years or so. Now everything was coming to a head, and their noisome rage spewed forth with nothing to check it. There were orgies of murders against the native population, which was ridding itself of base women, unbelievers, and all off-worlders who corrupted both theirs, and Sargon's world. The expulsion and murder of thousands of off-world citizens was only part of a larger picture, which was truly a nightmare. Miriam knew this.

The time for Yut's departure came at 06:30, giving him an hour and a half to report to the spaceport which was only 20 minutes away. He handed Miriam the warehouse key and instructed her to shut off the lights and lock up when she left. The key was then to be placed in the employee entrance door mail drop. With this, he bid her farewell.

The state of frenzy increased throughout the foreign trade exempt area where the majority of off-world citizens now lived. During years past, the tradesmen and their families had lived in every major city on the planet, but now they were confined to the spaceport's treaty exempt area, which would lose its exempt status on Love month first.

Miriam was unable to find her government contact, Uy Aga. His name didn't appear on any of the Palean Company registers or in the Lublinog world directory. She surmised that he, too, had been murdered by Sargon's faithful.

The final day of off-world tolerance arrived, and Miriam decided to report early at the spaceport's embarkation station, just in case there was any last minute trouble. She shut off all of the warehouse lights and locked the employee's entrance door behind her as Yut had instructed her. After dropping the key in the company mail slot, she began the ten kilometer walk to the spaceport's embarkation depot. She didn't mind leaving early; the deserted warehouse was too lonely for words.

Somehow, the act of locking-up comforted her. It seemed as though the world was going to end. But she, and Yut before her, felt an urge to keep everything as normal as possible up until the very last.

The milling crowd of frightened refugees was something out of Borgdragon's video histories. Men, women, and children of all races and descriptions were desperately trying to escape the horrible fate promised them by Sargon's faithful butchers.

Miriam waited quietly in line between two families of terrified Selezians, members of a tall, dark race. Each huddled close to the other in apprehension and fear. As they heard the customs gate creak open, a dark, slim figure darted straight through the line just in front of Miriam, grabbing the treasured ticket from a young boy and knocking him down in the collision. The thief then streaked out of sight into the thick of the waiting crowd, making a clean escape. He was either a ticket holder who was preying on others to sell tickets to the highest bidder, or a desperate man trying to save his own life. From his well-practiced tactics, Miriam suspected he was just a heartless exploiter.

The family in front of her was in a state of shock. The boy was crying in fear and shame at having lost his ticket. They were only two short meters away from the customs gate when it opened and therefore had their tickets held out for inspection when the theft took place. With escape so near, one of them would be left behind.

The boy's father grabbed the sobbing child and pulled him close. "Son, it wasn't your fault. Take my ticket. I'm relying on you to take care of your mother and sister for me. Do you understand? I'm relying on you!"

He thrust his own ticket into the boy's hand. "Do as I say. You three are all I have to live for."

Miriam saw the woman look at her husband with her own death in her eyes. Then, thinking quickly, Miriam tapped the man on his shoulder, saying, "Your thief did not get his ticket."

The man stared at her in disbelief, his mouth open in shock. People behind them began pushing toward the open customs gate, and Miriam felt herself being pushed against him.

"Here is your son's ticket. The thief dropped it when he collided with him and I picked it up. Here!" She thrust her own ticket into the man's hand, and before he could say anything, she said, "You can thank me on the ship. Now it is time for us to go through customs."

The man took the ticket. "May the Eternal remember you . . . yes, we will see you inside."

He turned and pushed his family through the gate. Later, he looked for her to thank her, but couldn't find the grey old elf with the strange eyes who saved his life.

The transaction had taken place so quickly that those behind didn't know what happened, nor did they notice the obscure figure step quickly out of the line. Everyone was crowding close together for protection from theft.

Miriam walked back to the foreign trade area, thinking about the family. The man seemed oddly familiar. Well, she wouldn't see him or his family again.

Once she arrived at the doomed trade area, she saw hundreds of frightened people, all without any means of self-defense or escape, milling around in clusters. Most were in a state of complete apathy. There was no escape from the faithful hoards of Sargon's sweet love. Already large numbers of people had poisoned themselves and their children, but the others feared death too much to commit suicide.

On and on they waited for the fateful hour, midnight - the beginning of the first day of Lovemonth, Sargon's year 8,914,114. Miriam sat on a low grassy knoll overlooking the dusty streets and watched the people as they milled around. The red sun sank slowly behind distant, mountain peaks, gradually immersing the foreign trade area in darkness.

Miriam was determined to do more than roll over and die like a coward. She would be damned if she didn't take one or two of the faithful butchers with her, and perhaps more. After it was completely dark, she hid herself away in a store filled with

foodstuffs and exotic liqueurs. She found a sharp knife behind the meat counter, and knew she could kill at least one, even if the mob was armed. The element of surprise was on her side, one life for hers.

Miriam crouched down behind the counter in the darkness, waiting. She heard the sounds of violence coming closer, the hoarse howls of men set on murder and the hapless cries and screams of their frightened victims. Though she was behind the counter, she saw the dim orange-red of many fires as they shone through the dusty windows and lighted the dark room. Shadows from the nearby fires flickered hypnotically, while the stomping and noise came closer.

Finally the store's windows were smashed in, increasing the intensity of the noise. The front door was mercilessly kicked open as dark, massive figures of the angry beasts surged into the shallow room. Miriam felt a lump of fear rise in her throat as she tensed herself for an attack.

"There's some hidden in here. I can smell'em!" bellowed a crusty voice. As the lumbering figure drew near, Miriam sprang out of her hiding place, thrusting her sharp knife toward his bulging midsection. Then she found herself sprawled on the dusty floor, with six huge beasts grabbing and tearing at her. They tore the knife from her hand, before tying her with a thick cord and tossing her over a lumpy shoulder. They carried her outside, the blood rushing to her head.

"Hey!" bellowed the crusty voice again. "The little freak's leg fell off!"

Miriam heard an ominous cheer. She was angry because she'd missed her target. Her damn leg had given away under the sudden shift of her weight and torque of her movement.

She was abruptly jolted and thrown into a heap of squirming bodies laying tied in a drainage ditch at the edge of town. As she lay there, smelling the sweat, blood and breezes carrying whiffs of fear and death, she heard the moans and whimpers of hundreds of frightened people, and the jeers of their butchers above them. She, too, was terrified and feared dying here alone and forsaken.

Miriam smelled the motor oil before it hit her. She gasped in the suffocating fumes as the spray of hot oil stung her tender old skin. She knew that this was it, and that she would shortly be dead. She thought briefly of her friends, and of her Ben, then, spoke the

ancient prayer. Her clear voice rose above the moans of the frightened victims.

"Hear, O'daughters of Compassionate Justice, the Eternal our Creator, the Eternal is one!"

Her final words were drowned out by the frantic screams of burning people. She only felt the wild flames for a short time, for all of her concentration was focused upon her prayer of eternal commitment as the flames consumed her living flesh.

Miriam watched herself burn, and saw the bodies of the poor exiled men, women, and children burning, all screaming in terror and agony. Her body lay burning with one leg missing, looking like a castaway doll broken at play. Her heart was sickened by the sight of all these innocent victims, all being sacrificed for the monster Sargon's glory, in this pathetic pyre of agony.

The fires dwindled, and the appeased faithful went home to praise their Sweet Sargon and enjoy a good night's sleep. Miriam watched as the carrion birds and rodents began their frenzied feasts, leaving only after nothing but char and bones remained.

The month of Love ended, and the cold winter set in with its pelting rain, and sleet, and a thick blanket of snow, then came spring and then summer.

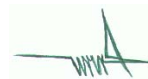
The seasons passed slowly, lazily. The foreign trade area crumbled into decay, and nothing remained of the once-living and thriving community.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

Miriam's life wasn't very long by our normal standards, being cut off as it was. But, considering the circumstances of her birth into these truculent times on Samael-Borgdragon's Children's playground, then living 95 years in a hidden apartment with only the image of a long-dead woman for company, her life wasn't without meaning. She was instrumental in the destruction of Samael-Borgdragon and Agtren Estates and transferring both Ruby and Sapphire to Three-Stones Central along with bringing us some knowledge of PARRSOOVOOV'S alien presence.

Miriam rose from total obscurity to a resourceful and dedicated messenger who traveled the void between the stars with those hardened warriors who man our outer rim fleet without losing her innocence or faith in humanity. She experienced events never dreamed of by the teeming populations of millions of worlds in our galaxy and in the end, displayed her compassionate nature by giving her safe passage from certain death to a frightened child. Her untimely death in that burning ditch outside Lublinog's Foreign Trade Area, then, had some small meaning in the scheme of our times.



Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor
Archivist

Nashramh Class I Scout Destroyer
600 meters long

